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Córdoba & the Central Sierras

Argentina's second city is bursting with life. Home to not one but seven major universities, Córdoba has a young population that ensures an excellent nightlife and a healthy cultural scene. Art is one of the city's strong points, and the four major galleries here are truly world-class. The business center of the country's most populous province, Córdoba also boasts a fascinating history, owing its architectural and cultural heritage to the Jesuits, who set up shop here when they first arrived in Argentina.

Outside of the city, the rolling hill country of the Central Sierras is dotted with towns that could grab your attention for a day or a month. The region boasts five Jesuit missions that have been declared Unesco World Heritage sites, each of them located in quaint little satellite towns that are an easy day trip from the capital.

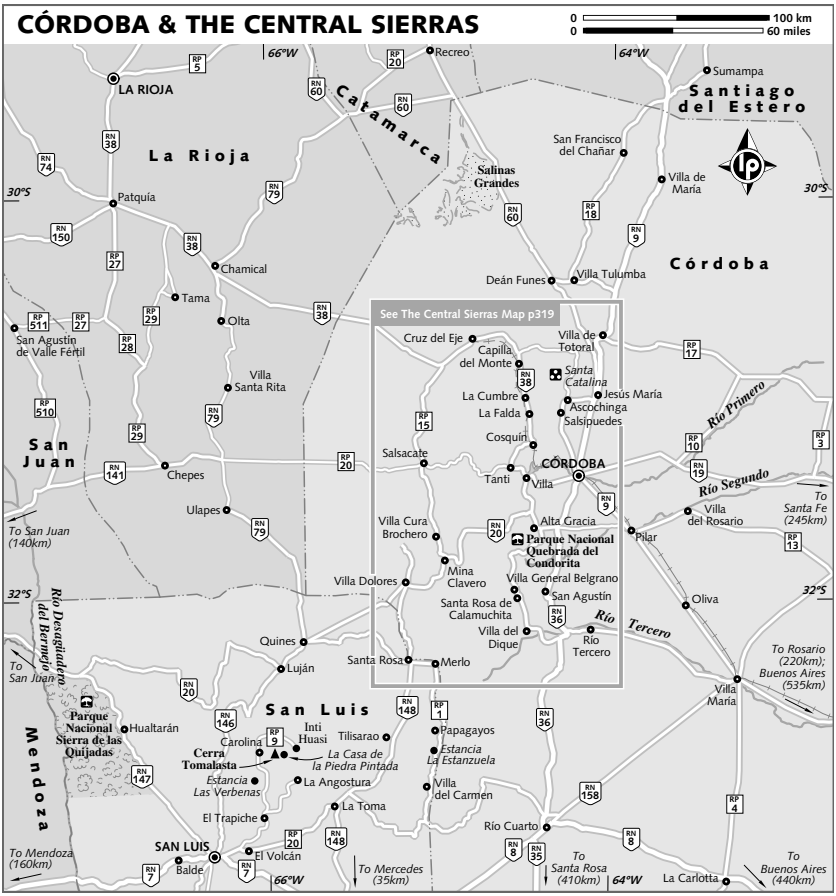
Adventure buffs won't be left twiddling their thumbs, either – the paragliding is excellent at La Cumbre and Merlo and there's fantastic trekking to be done in two national parks – the fossil-strewn Sierra de las Quijadas and the condor haven of Quebrada del Condorito.

Further to the southwest, the Valle de Conlara and Sierras Puntanas offer a real chance to get away from the crowds and into the heart of the countryside. Highlights include the caves and rock art at Inti Huasi, the palm-filled valley of Papagayos and the picturesque ex-mining village of Carolina. Public transportation in this part of the region is often rare and sometimes nonexistent, but the wealth of experiences that awaits far outweighs any inconvenience.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Soak in the culture and wander the gorgeous streets of the stately city of **Córdoba** (p309)
- Check out ancient caves, rock art and stunning highland scenery around **Carolina** (p334)
- Get high with the paragliding fanatics at **La Cumbre** (p322)
- Take a breather at the atmospheric 17th-century Jesuit *estancia* (ranch) of **Santa Catalina** (p324)
- Break in your hiking boots among the surreal rock formations of **Parque Nacional Sierra de las Quijadas** (p334)

- POPULATION: 3.8 MILLION
- AREA: 242,069 SQ KM



Climate

Generally, November to February are the hottest months in the Central Sierras, when 29°C days are common and nights are pleasantly warm. This is also the rainy season, but days are sunny enough for the hordes of sunbathers that descend on the sierras all summer. Winters are cool but get little precipitation and are often nice for outdoor pursuits. At higher altitudes (such as in La Cumbre), light snowfall is not uncommon. Fall and spring get more rain than winter, but temperatures are often ideal for hiking and biking.

National Parks

In San Luis province, the rarely visited Parque Nacional Sierra de las Quijadas (p334) is an excellent alternative to the better-known Parque Provincial Ischigualasto (p373) in San Juan province: getting there is far easier, and you'll often have the desert canyons and rock formations all to yourself. Parque Nacional Quebrada del Condorito (p328) is well worth a day trip from Córdoba to see the impressive Andean condors the park protects.

Getting There & Around

Córdoba makes an excellent stop if you're heading south or southwest toward Mendoza. The city has bus connections throughout the country.

The towns throughout the sierras are all easily accessible by public transportation, but many tiny, remote towns and Jesuit *estancias*

(ranches) can only be reached with your own wheels. The sierras' dense network of roads, many well paved but others only gravel, make them good candidates for bicycle touring; Argentine drivers here seem a bit less ruthless than elsewhere in the country. A mountain bike is still the best choice.

CÓRDOBA

☎ 0351 / pop 1.5 million / elev 400m

It's an old guidebook cliché, but Córdoba really *is* a fascinating mix of old and new. Where else will you find DJs spinning electro-tango in crowded student bars next to 17th-century Jesuit ruins?

In 2006 Córdoba was awarded the hefty title of Cultural Capital of the Americas, and it fits the city like a glove. Four excellent municipal galleries – dedicated to emerging, contemporary, classical and fine art respectively – are within easy walking distance of each other and the city center. The alternative film scene is alive and kicking. Young designers and artisans strut their stuff at a weekend crafts market that sprawls for blocks and is one of the best in the country. And if all this action is too much for you, quaint little mountain villages are a short bus ride away.

ORIENTATION

Córdoba is 715km northwest of Buenos Aires. Most colonial sites lie within a few blocks of Plaza San Martín, the city's urban nucleus. The commercial center is just northwest of the plaza, where the main pedestrian malls – 25 de Mayo and Rivera Indarte – intersect. Obispo Trejo, just west of the plaza, has the finest concentration of colonial buildings. Just south of downtown, Parque Sarmiento offers relief from the bustling, densely built downtown.

East–west streets change names at San Martín/Independencia and north–south streets change at Deán Funes/Rosario de Santa Fe.

INFORMATION

Internet Access

Cyber cafes are tucked into *locutorios* (telephone kiosks) throughout the center, and they're everywhere in Nueva Córdoba.

Stone (☎ 0351-15-547-6458; Av Marcelo T de Alvear 370; per hr AR$3; 🕒 10am-dawn) One of the grooviest cyber joints in town. Pizzas, drinks and empanadas, too.

Laundry

Trapitos (☎ 422-5877; Independencia 898; full service about AR$15)

Medical Services

Emergency hospital (☎ 421-0243; cnr Catamarca & Blvd Guzmán)

Money

Cambios (money-exchange offices) and ATMs are on Rivadavia north of the plaza; both are also at the main bus terminal and airport.

Cambio Barujel (cnr Rivadavia & 25 de Mayo) High commissions.

Maguitur (☎ 421-6200; 25 de Mayo 122) Charges 3% on traveler's checks.

Post

Main post office (Av General Paz 201)

Tourist Information

ACA (Automóvil Club Argentino; ☎ 421-4636; cnr Av General Paz & Humberto Primo) Argentina's auto club; good source for provincial road maps.

Casa Cabildo Tourist Information Office (☎ 428-5856; Independencia 30; 🕒 8am-8pm) Together provincial and municipal tourist boards maintain their main office in the historic Casa Cabildo.

Provincial tourist office airport (☎ 434-8390; Aeropuerto Pajas Blancas; 🕒 8am-8pm Mon-Fri); bus terminal (☎ 433-1980; 🕒 8am-9pm)

Travel Agencies

Asatej (☎ 422-9453; www.asatej.com; Av Vélez Sársfield 361, Patio Olmos, Local 319) On the 3rd floor of Patio Olmos shopping center. Nonprofit student travel agency with great staff. Open to all ages and nonstudents.

ESTANCIAS IN THE CENTRAL SIERRAS

From rustic little getaways to sprawling, atmospheric ranches, the Central Sierras offer a small but excellent selection of *estancias*.

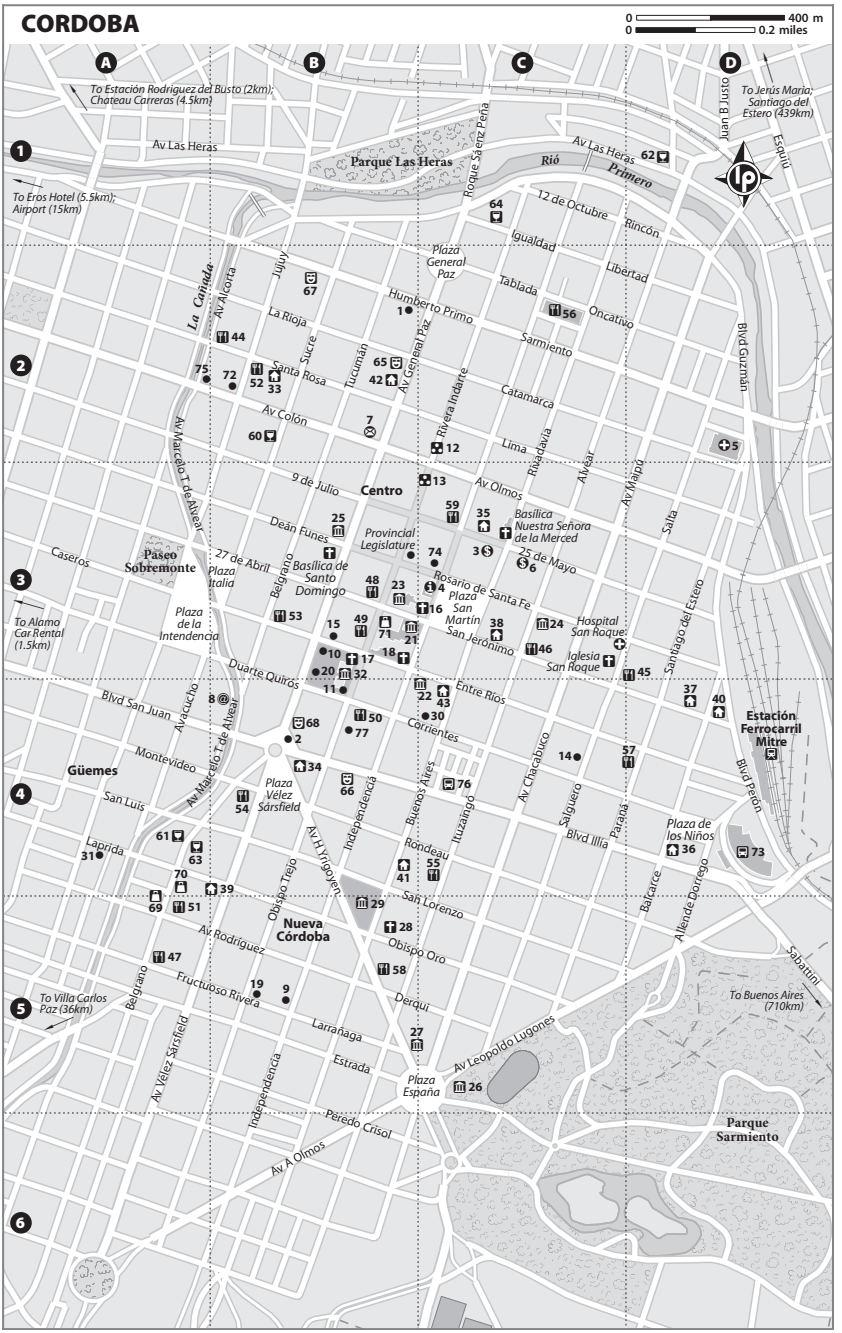
Estancia El Viejo Piquete (p323) A cozy ranch house near La Cumbre with fabulous views over the Valle de Punilla.

Estancia La Estanzuela (p336) Wonderfully preserved, set on lush grounds.

Estancia Las Verbenas (p334) Set in a beautiful glade, it's a truly rustic experience.

La Ranchería de Santa Catalina (p324) Spend the night in the old slave quarters.

Puesto Viejo (p324) *Estancia* atmosphere at backpacker prices.


CORDOBA
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1
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To Estación Rodriguez del Busto (2km); Chateau Carreras (4.5km)
To Eros Hotel (5.5km); Airport (15km)
To Villa Carlos Paz (36km)
To Alamo Car Rental (1.5km)
To Jerús María; Santiago del Estero (439km)
To Buenos Aires (710km)
Av Las Heras
Parque Las Heras
Río Primero
Roque Sáenz Peña
Juan B Justo
Esquiú
12 de Octubre
Rincón
Igualdad
Libertad
Plaza General Paz
Tablada
Oncativo
Humberto Primo
Sarmiento
La Rioja
Sucre
Tucumán
Av General Paz
Blvd Guzmán
La Cañada
Av Alcorta
Julio
Santa Rosa
Catamarca
Av Colón
Rivera Indarte
Riobamba
Lima
Alvear
Av Malvinas
9 de Julio
Centro
Av Olmos
Basílica Nuestra Señora de la Merced
25 de Mayo
Salta
Deán Funes
Provincial Legislature
Caseros
Paseo Sobremonte
27 de Abril
Plaza Italia
Belgrano
Basílica de Santo Domingo
Rosario de Santa Fe
Plaza San Martín
San Jerónimo
Hospital San Roque
Iglesia San Roque
Santiago del Estero
Plaza de la Intendencia
Duarte Quirós
Entre Ríos
Corrientes
Blvd San Juan
Avellaneda
Av Marcelo T de Alvear
Montevideo
Güemes
Estación Ferrocarril Mitre
Blvd Perón
San Luis
Plaza Vélez Sársfield
Buenos Aires
Independencia
Av Chacabuco
Salguero
Blvd Illia
Paraná
Plaza de los Niños
Laprida
Av H Yrigoyen
Rondeau
Iruzaingó
Balcarce
Alende Borrego
Obispo Trejo
San Lorenzo
Nueva Córdoba
Av Rodríguez
Obispo Oro
Sabattini
Fluctuoso Rivera
Belgrano
Derqui
Larrañaga
Estrada
Av Leopoldo Lugones
Av Vélez Sársfield
Independencia
Plaza España
Peredo Crisol
Av A Olmos
Parque Sarmiento

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Iglesia Catedral 16 C3
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SIGHTS

There's plenty to see in Córdoba, so allow yourself at least a couple of days for wandering around. Most churches are open roughly from 9am to noon and from 5pm to 8pm. Museum opening hours change regularly depending on the season and the administration.

Centro

Downtown Córdoba is a treasure of colonial buildings and other historical monuments.

IGLESIA CATEDRAL

The construction of Córdoba's **cathedral** (cnr Independencia & 27 de Abril; guided visit AR$10; 9am-12:30pm & 4:30-7pm) began in 1577 and dragged on for more than two centuries under several architects, including Jesuits and Franciscans, and though it lacks any sense of architectural unity, it's a beautiful structure. Crowned by a Romanesque dome, it overlooks Plaza San Martín. The lavish interior was painted by renowned *cordobés* (Córdoban) painter Emilio Caraffa. Guided visits leave hourly between 9am and 5pm from Psje Santa Catalina 61, the entry on the north side of the cathedral.

MUSEO DE LA MEMORIA

A chilling testament to the excesses of Argentina's military dictatorship, this **museum** (San Jerónimo s/n; admission free; 9am-noon & 2-8pm Tue-Sun) occupies a space formerly used as a clandestine center for detention and torture. It was operated by the dreaded Department of Intelligence (D2), a special division created in Córdoba dedicated to the kidnap and torture of suspected political agitators and the 'reassignment' of their children to less politically suspect families.

The space itself is stark and unembellished, and the walls are covered with enlarged photographs of people who are still 'missing' after

30 years. There's not much joy here, but the museum stands as a vital reminder of an era that human-rights groups hope will never be forgotten.

MANZANA JESUÍTICA

Córdoba's beautiful Manzana Jesuítica (Jesuit Block), like that of Buenos Aires, is also known as the Manzana de las Luces (Block of Enlightenment), and was initially associated with the influential Jesuit order.

Designed by the Flemish Padre Philippe Lemaire, the **Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesús** (cnr Obispo Trejo & Caseros; admission free) dates from 1645 but was not completed until 1671, with the successful execution of Lemaire's plan for a cedar roof in the form of an inverted ship's hull. Lemaire, unsurprisingly, was once a boat builder. Inside, the church's baroque altarpiece is made from carved Paraguayan cedar from Misiones province. The **Capilla Doméstica** (Domestic Chapel; guided visits per person AR$6; 🕒 10am, 11am, 5pm & 6pm), completed in 1644, sits directly behind the church on Caseros. Its ornate ceiling was made with cowhide stretched over a skeleton of thick taguaro cane and painted with pigments composed partially of boiled bones. Guided visits leave from inside the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba.

In 1613 Fray Fernando de Trejo y Sanabria founded the Seminario Convictorio de San Javier, which, after being elevated to university status in 1622, became the **Universidad Nacional de Córdoba** (☎ 433-2075; Obispo Trejo 242; 🕒 9am-1pm & 4-8pm). The university is the country's oldest and contains, among other national treasures, part of the Jesuits' Grand Library and the **Museo Histórico de la Universidad Nacional de Córdoba** (☎ 433-2075; guided visits per person AR$10; 🕒 10am, 11am, 5pm & 6pm Tue-Sun). Guided visits are the only way to see the inside and are well worth taking. The guides let you wander through the Colegio and peek into the classrooms while students run around.

Next door, the **Colegio Nacional de Monserrat** (Obispo Trejo 294) dates from 1782, though the college itself was founded in 1687 and transferred after the Jesuit expulsion. Though the interior cloisters are original, the exterior was considerably modified in 1927 by restoring architect Jaime Roca, who gave the building its present baroque flare.

In 2000 Unesco declared the Manzana Jesuítica a World Heritage site, along with five Jesuit *estancias* throughout the province.

MUSEO HISTÓRICO PROVINCIAL MARQUÉS DE SOBREMONTE

It's worth dropping into this **museum** (☎ 433-1661/71; Rosario de Santa Fe 218; admission AR$3; 🕒 9am-2pm Mon-Sat), one of the most important historical museums in the country, if only to see the colonial house it occupies: an 18th-century home that once belonged to Rafael Núñez, the colonial governor of Córdoba and later viceroy of the Río de la Plata. It has 26 rooms, seven interior patios, meter-thick walls and an impressive wrought-iron balcony supported by carved wooden brackets.

CRIPTA JESUÍTICA

The Jesuits, at the beginning of the 18th century, built the **Cripta Jesuítica** (cnr Rivera Indarte & Av Colón; admission AR$3; 🕒 9am-3pm Mon-Fri). It was originally designed as a novitiate and later converted to a crypt and crematorium. Abandoned after the Jesuit expulsion, it was demolished and buried around 1829 when the city, while expanding Av Colón, knocked the roof into the subterranean naves and built over the entire structure. It remained all but forgotten until Telecom, while laying underground telephone cable in 1989, accidentally ran into it. The city, with a new outlook on such treasures, exquisitely restored the crypt and uses it regularly for musical and theatrical performances and art exhibits. Entrances lie on either side of Av Colón in the middle of the Rivera Indarte pedestrian mall.

MUSEO MUNICIPAL DE BELLAS ARTES DR GENARO PÉREZ

This **museum** (☎ 433-1512; Av General Paz 33; 🕒 10am-8pm Tue-Sun) is prized for its collection of paintings from the 19th and 20th centuries. Works, including those by Emilio Caraffa, Lucio Fontana, Lino Spilimbergo, Antonio Berni and Antonio Seguí, chronologically display the history of the *cordobés* school of painting, at the front of which stands Genaro Pérez himself. The museum is housed in Palacio Garzón, an unusual late-19th-century building named for its original owner; it also has outstanding changing contemporary art exhibits.

PLAZA SAN MARTÍN & AROUND

Córdoba's lovely and lively central plaza dates from 1577. Its western side is dominated by the white arcade of the restored **Cabildo** (colonial town-council building), completed in 1785 and containing three interior patios, as

well as basement cells. All are open to the public as part of the **Museo de la Ciudad** (☎ 433-1543; Independencia 30; 🕒 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Tue-Sun), a block to the south.

Occupying nearly half a city block, the **Iglesia de Santa Teresa y Convento de Carmelitas Descalzas de San José** (cnr Caseros & Independencia; 🕒 6-8pm) was completed in 1628 and has functioned ever since as a closed-order convent for Carmelite nuns. Only the church itself is open to visitors. Once part of the convent, the **Museo de Arte Religioso Juan de Tejeda** (☎ 423-0175; Independencia 122; 🕒 9:30am-12:30pm Wed-Sat), next door, exhibits religious artifacts, as well as paintings by *cordobés* masters.

Nueva Córdoba & Güemes

Before the northwestern neighborhoods of Chateau Carreras and Cerro de las Rosas lured the city's elite to their peaceful hillsides, Nueva Córdoba was the neighborhood of the *cordobés* aristocracy. It's now popular with students, which explains the proliferation of brick high-rise apartment buildings. Still, a stroll past the stately old residences that line the wide Av H Yrigoyen reveals the area's aristocratic past.

Paseo del Buen Pastor (Av H Yrigoyen 325; 🕒 10am-8pm) is a cultural center/performance space, which was built in 1901 as a combined chapel/monastery/women's prison. In mid-2007 it was re-inaugurated to showcase work by Córdoba's young and emerging artists. There are a couple of hip cafe-bars in the central patio area where you can kick back with an Appletini or two. The attached chapel (which has been desanctified) hosts regular live-music performances – stop by for a program, or check Thursday's edition of the local newspaper *La Voz del Interior* for details.

While you're in the neighborhood, pop across the road to see the marvelous neo-Gothic **Parroquia Sagrado Corazón de Jesús de los Capuchinos** (cnr Buenos Aires & Obispo Oro), built between 1928 and 1934, whose glaring oddity is its missing steeple (omitted on purpose to symbolize human imperfection). Among the numerous sculptures that cover the church's facade are those of Atlases symbolically struggling to bare the spiritual weight of the religious figures above them (and sins and guilt of the rest of us).

Nueva Córdoba's landmark building, the **Palacio Ferrerya** (Av H Yrigoyen 551; 🕒 10am-8pm Tue-Sun) was built in 1914 and designed by Ernest Sanson in the Louis XVI style. The building itself is amazing, and has recently been converted into a fine-arts museum, featuring more than 400 works in 12 rooms spread over three floors. If you're into art or architecture, this place is a don't miss.

One of the city's best contemporary art museums is the neoclassical **Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes Emilio Caraffa** (☎ 433-3414; Av H Yrigoyen 651; 🕒 10am-8pm Tue-Fri, 10:30am-7pm Sat & Sun). It stands ostentatiously on the eastern side of Plaza España. Architect Juan Kronfuss designed the building as a museum and it was inaugurated in 1916. Exhibits change monthly. South of the museum the city unfolds into its largest open-space area, the **Parque Sarmiento**, designed by Charles Thays, the architect who designed Mendoza's Parque General San Martín.

Once a strictly working-class neighborhood, Güemes is now known for the eclectic **antique stores** and **artisan shops** that line the main drag of Belgrano, between Rodríguez and Laprida. Its weekend *feria artisanal* (p317), one of the country's best, teems with antique vendors, arts and crafts and a healthy dose of Córdoba's hippies. It's within the same block as the **Museo Iberoamericano de Artesanías** (☎ 433-4368; cnr Belgrano & Av Rodríguez; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Fri), which houses beautiful crafts from throughout South America. A good way back to the city center is along **La Cañada**, an acacia-lined stone canal with arched bridges.

COURSES

Córdoba is an excellent place to study Spanish; in many ways, being a student is what Córdoba is all about. Lessons cost about AR$60 per hour for one-on-one tuition or AR$600 to AR$800 per week in small classes.

Escuela Superior de Yoga (☎ 427-0712; Salgüero 256) Offers yoga classes with monthly rates.

Facultad de Lenguas (☎ 433-1073/5, ext 30; Av Vélez Sársfield 187) Part of the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba.

SET Idiomas (☎ 421-1719; www.learningspanish.com.ar; Corrientes 21) Offers accommodation and afternoon activities at extra cost and discounts for extended study.

Tsunami Tango (☎ 15-313-8746; www.tsunamitango.blogspot.com; Laprida 453) Tango classes and *milongas* (tango halls) Tuesday to Saturday. The website lists times.

TOURS

City tours (in Spanish/English AR$30/50) Absorb Córdoba's rich history by taking one of the guided city tours that depart at 4:30pm Tuesday to Sunday from Casa Cabildo (p309). Reserve a day in advance if you want a tour in English.

Latitud Sur (☎ 425-6023; www.latitudsurtrek.com.ar; Fructuoso Rivera 70) Run by an enthusiastic young couple with boundless knowledge of both the sierras and the city, Latitud Sur offers mountain-bike, trekking, rock-climbing and horseback-riding tours throughout the Sierras de Córdoba, including day trips to Los Gigantes and Parque Nacional Quebrada del Condorito (p328). Prices range from AR$90 to AR$120, including transport, guide and lunch. Its city tours are outstanding, fun and only cost AR$25 per person.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

During the first three weeks of April, the city puts on a large **crafts market** (locally called 'FICO') at the city fairgrounds, in the town's north near Chateau Carreras stadium. Bus 31 from Plaza San Martín goes there. Mid-September's **Feria del Libro** is a regional book fair.

SLEEPING

Hotels on and around Plaza San Martín make exploring the center a cinch, but you'll have to walk several blocks for dinner and nightlife. Hotels along La Cañada and in Nueva Córdoba, on the other hand, mean going out to dinner and hitting the bars is a simple matter of walking down the street.

Centro

Aldea Hostel (☎ 426-1312; www.aldeahostel.com; Santa Rosa 447; dm AR$32, d with/without bathroom AR$120/90; 💻 📶) It has plain but spacious rooms in a mildly inconvenient location. The patio, rooftop terrace and bar areas ooze atmosphere and the vibe is young and friendly.

Palenque Hostel (☎ 423-7588; www.palenquehostel.com.ar; Av General Paz 371; dm AR$35, d without bathroom AR$100; ❄ 💻 📶) By far the prettiest hostel in Córdoba, the Palenque occupies a classic old house and retains much of its original charm. Facilities are extensive, including laundry area, air-con and nightly cooking classes. Dorms are large, with plenty of room to move.

our pick **Hotel Garden** (☎ 421-4729; www.garden-hotel.com.ar; 25 de Mayo 35; s/d standard AR$80/110, deluxe AR$130/160; ❄ 📶) About as central as it gets. Standard rooms are OK value, but the deluxe are several steps up in quality and a very good deal.

Hotel Quetzal (☎ 426-5117; www.hotelquetzal.com.ar; San Jerónimo 579; s/d AR$110/150; ❄ 💻) Spacious, minimalistic, modern rooms are what's on offer here. Once the seemingly endless renovations are done, this should be a very tranquil option.

LOVE BY THE HOUR

Every city in Argentina has *hoteles por hora* (hourly rate hotels), where people take their secret lovers for a romp in the good old proverbial hay. They vary from cheap, nondescript *residenciales* (cheap hotels) to deluxe love pads with black lights, wall-to-wall mirrors, nonstop sex-TV, Jacuzzis and room-service menus featuring every imaginable sex toy under the sun. These deluxe versions are a part of under-the-table Argentine culture that possibly shouldn't be missed (provided you're traveling with a partner who's game, of course).

Córdoba boasts four deluxe *hoteles por hora* on the road to the airport, and if you haven't experienced one of these Argentine institutions, now's your chance. Although they're geared toward folks with cars, you can go in a taxi (trust us, we know). Here's a quick primer on how they work.

First, it's all about anonymity. As you drive into the hotel a big number flashes on a sign; that's your room number. Drive to the garage door with your number on it, pull in and close the garage door; if you're in a taxi, the driver will drop you in the garage and leave. Close the garage door and enter the room.

In five minutes the phone will ring, and the attendant will ask you if you'd like a complimentary beverage, which he or she then delivers through a tiny sliding door in the wall so no one sees anybody. When the attendant knocks on the door, you open it, take your drinks and pay for the room (AR$75 for two hours is the going rate). Ten minutes before your time is up, the attendant will courteously ring again to tell you it's time to get your gear back on.

Of the four hotels on the airport road, the best is **Eros Hotel** (Camino al aeropuerto, Km 5.5; AR$45 per hour). Rooms have Jacuzzis, bedside control panels, all the right TV channels and *all* the fun stuff. And it's impeccably clean.

A taxi costs about AR$20 each way from town. If you take one, call a *remise* (telephone taxi) from your hotel and have the driver pick you up later. They all know the drill – no pun intended.

Hotel Sussex (☎ 422-9070; www.hotelsussexcba.com.ar; San Jerónimo 125; s/d AR$200/250;) Another wonderful lobby (this one sporting vaulted ceilings, grand piano and fine art) leads on to more workaday rooms. At this price, you'd want to be getting plaza views.

Windsor Hotel (☎ 422-4012; www.windsortower.com; Buenos Aires 214; s/d from AR$412/473;) In a great downtown location, the Windsor is one of the few classic hotels in town with any real style. The lobby's all dark wood and brass, and the rooms have been tastefully renovated with modern fittings.

Nueva Córdoba & La Cañada

Le Grand Hostel (☎ 422-7115; www.legrandshostel.com; Buenos Aires 547; dm AR$39-50, d AR$110;) The best-looking hostel in town would be a madhouse if it ever hit its 108-bed capacity, but until then it's an excellent option. Need a good night's sleep? Look elsewhere.

Hotel Viña de Italia (☎ 425-1678; www.hotelvinadeitalia.com.ar; San Jerónimo 611; s/d AR$110/150;) There's a bit of elegance left in this 150-room hotel, and the midsize rooms include TV, phone, air-con and heating. The rooms aren't nearly as graceful as the lobby, but they're still a good deal.

Hotel Viena (☎ 460-0909; www.hotelviena.com.ar; Laprida 235; s/d AR$170/200;) This modern hotel in the heart of Nueva Córdoba offers bright, clean rooms and an excellent breakfast buffet. There are lots of nooks for sitting in the lobby area, and there's a restaurant on the premises. Good choice.

Hotel Heydi (☎ 422-2219; www.hotelheydi.com.ar; Blvd Illia 615; s/d AR$170/220;) This is the best of the bunch near the bus terminal: a modern, immaculate place with friendly, professional staff.

Amerian (☎ 420-7000; www.amerian.com; Blvd San Juan 165; r from AR$370;) Straddling the border between the new town and the historic center, the Amerian is a big-business hotel with an excellent location and all the comforts. Sunset drinks at the bar by the rooftop pool are near obligatory.

EATING

Mercado Norte (cnr Rivadavia & Oncativo; Mon-Sat) Córdoba's indoor market has delicious and inexpensive food, such as pizza, empanadas and seafood. Browsing the clean stalls selling every imaginable cut of meat, including whole *chivitos* (goat) and pigs, is a must.

Bar San Carlos (Plazoleta San Roque, Salguero & San Jerónimo; set meals AR$12; lunch & dinner) Neighborhood *parrillas* (steak restaurants) are fast disappearing in Córdoba, but the San Carlos is one of the best, and still hanging in there. Get here reasonably early and beat the old guys out of a table on the small shady plaza.

Verde Siempre Verde (☎ 421-8820; 9 de Julio 36; mains from AR$15; lunch & dinner) Delicious vegetarian buffet that also serves set meals.

La Parrilla de Raul (Jujuy 278; mains AR$15-30; lunch & dinner) Of Córdoba's *parrillas,* this is probably one of the most famous. *Parrillada* (mixed grill) for two costs only AR$30, not including extras such as drinks or salad.

El Arrabal (☎ 460-2990; Belgrano 899; mains AR$18-30; lunch & dinner) One of the few old-style restaurants in Nueva Córdoba (OK, so it may be a reconstruction…), this place serves slightly pricey, imaginative regional and house specialties. It packs out for tango classes (AR$15) at 7pm nightly and the dinner tango show (AR$25) at 11pm Thursday to Saturday. Make a reservation.

El Ruedo (cnr Obispo Trejo & 27 de Abril; mains around AR$20; 8am-10pm) It doesn't stray too far from the steak, sandwich and pizza formula here, but the plaza-side spot under big shady trees is a winner, as are the *limonadas con soda* (lemon juice with soda water) on a hot day.

Qa'ra (Parana 206; mains from AR$20; lunch & dinner) Excellent Middle Eastern food provides a welcome dash of variety. The pretty courtyard is the place to be on a sunny day and the *picada* (sample plate) for two (AR$30) is a journey in deliciousness.

our pick **Las Rías de Galicia** (Montevideo 271; set lunch AR$20, mains AR$25-50; lunch & dinner) An upscale Spanish restaurant with the best value set lunch in town. Going à la carte gets you all sorts of goodies, including some excellent seafood selections.

Bursatil (San Jerónimo & Ituzaingó; mains AR$25-30; breakfast, lunch & dinner) Stylish, modern cafes are starting to pop up in the old part of town, and Bursatil is one of the finest. There's a cool modern interior, good coffee and a small, Asian-inspired menu.

Mega Doner (Ituzaingó 528; set meals AR$27-40; lunch & dinner) Conveniently located in Nueva Córdoba's bar district, this place specializes in real giro *doners*. Daily lunch specials are an excellent deal and there's outdoor seating.

La Nieta 'e La Pancha (☎ 468-1920; Belgrano 783; mains AR$30-35; ⏲ dinner Tue-Fri, 4:30pm-1am Sat & Sun) Wonderful staff prepares and serves a changing menu of delectable regional specialties, creative pastas and house recipes. Be sure to save room for dessert. Check out the lovely upstairs terrace, which catches breezes and gives ample people-watching ops on the street below.

Alcorta (☎ 424-7452; Av Alcorta 330; mains AR$30-55; ⏲ lunch & dinner) This upmarket *parrilla,* esteemed for its grilled meats (many say they're the best in town), also serves delicious pasta and fish. Try the *mollejitas al sauvignan blanc* (sweetbreads in a white wine sauce).

Sushi Club (Yrigoyen 419; mains AR$40; ⏲ lunch & dinner) Sushi in Córdoba? Well, why not? The surroundings are hip, the prices reasonable and the wasabi hit is the real deal.

Looking to chow down with Córdoba's student crowd? Pull up a stool at any of the following, where the empanadas, beer and *locro* (spicy corn and meat stew) flow freely.

La Alameda (Obispo Trejo 170; empanadas AR$2.50, locro AR$12; ⏲ lunch & dinner) Pull up a bench and wash down your homemade empanadas with some ice-cold beer. Then write some graffiti on the wall.

La Candela (Duarte Quiros 67; empanadas AR$2.50, locro AR$14; ⏲ lunch & dinner) Rustic and wonderfully atmospheric, run by three cranky but adorable señoras.

La Vieja Esquina (cnr Belgrano & Caseros; empanadas AR$2.50, locro AR$17; ⏲ lunch Mon-Sat) A cozy little lunch spot with stools and window seating. Order at the bar.

DRINKING

Córdoba's drink of choice is Fernet (a strong, medicinal-tasting herbed liquor from Italy), almost always mixed with Coke. If you don't mind a rough morning, start in on the stuff.

Nightlife in Córdoba basically divides itself into three areas – all the bright young things barhop in Nueva Córdoba – a walk along Rondeau between Avs H Yrigoyen and Chacabuco after midnight gives you a choice of dozens of bars, mostly playing laid-back electronic music.

North of the center, there's a string of live-music venues on Blvd Guzmán near the corner of Av General Paz.

Across the river on Av Las Heras between Roque Sáenz Peña and Juan B Justo (the area known locally as Abasto) are the discos and nightclubs. Go for a walk along here and you'll probably pick up free passes to some, if not all, of them.

Los Infernadas (Belgrano 631) A laid-back bar playing an eclectic range of music. Live music Thursday to Sundays and a big *patio cervecero* (beer garden) make this a standout.

But Mitre (www.butmitre.com; Av Marcelo T de Alvear 635) Extremely popular bar-cum–dance club on La Cañada. Check it out, especially on Thursday night.

Beep! (Sucre 171; admission incl drink AR$10; ⏲ midnight-dawn Thu-Sat) The best gay club in the center is completely empty until 2am and completely slamming until sunup.

Ojo Bizarro (Igualdad 176; admission AR$8-13) In a semidodgy neighborhood, the Bizarro is one of the city's more bohemian hangouts. There's plenty of mood lighting, and a different DJ in each of the four rooms.

El Barranco (Av Las Heras 58; admission AR$6-12) In the busy Albasto scene, this live-music venue cum disco is a good place to start, if only for the fact that it gets a crowd before 1am. Fridays are Latin dance partiesl; on Saturdays there are live bands.

ENTERTAINMENT

La Voz del Interior, Córdoba's main newspaper, has a reasonably comprehensive entertainment section every Thursday with show times and the like.

On Friday nights, the city hosts the **Patio del Tango** (admission AR$10, with dance lessons AR$20) on the outdoor Patio Mayor of the historic Cabildo (weather permitting), kicking off with two-hour tango lessons. Times vary, so it's best to stop by the Casa Cabildo Tourist Information Office (see p309).

Cuarteto music (a Córdoba invention) is predictably big here and played live in many venues. Unfortunately, it's also the gangsta rap of Argentine folk music and tends to attract undesirable crowds. **La Sala del Rey** (Humberto Primero 439) is a respectable venue and the best place to catch a cuarteto show, on Sunday, when the hugely popular band La Barra often plays.

Centro Cultural Casona Municipal (☎ 428-5600; cnr Av General Paz & La Rioja; ⏲ 8am-8pm Sun-Fri, 10am-10pm Sat) Shows contemporary and avante garde art, hosts concerts and offers month-long art and music courses.

Teatro del Libertador General San Martín (☎ 433-2319; Av Vélez Sársfield 365; admission AR$25-160; ⏲ box

office 9am-9pm) It's well worth going to a performance here, if only to see the opulence of the country's most historic theater. The theater was completed in 1891, and the floor was designed to be mechanically raised and leveled to the stage, so seats could be removed, allowing for grand parties for the aristocracy of the early 1900s.

Cineclub Municipal Hugo del Carril (☎ 433-2463; www.cineclubmunicipal.org.ar; Blvd San Juan 49; admission AR$6; ⏷ box office 9am-late) For a great night (or day) at the movies, pop into this municipal film house, which screens everything from art flicks to Latin American award winners and local films. Stop by for a program. There's also live music and theatrical performances here.

SHOPPING

Antique stores line Calle Belgrano in barrio Güemes, where there is also a **feria artisanal** (artisans' market; cnr Rodriguez & Belgrano; ⏷ 5-10pm Sat & Sun), one of the country's best. You'll find Argentine handicrafts at several stores downtown.

Paseo Colonial (Belgrano 795; ⏷ 10am-9pm Mon-Sat, 5-10pm Sun) To find out what the city's hip young designers have been working on, slip into this little arcade, featuring a variety of small shops selling clothes, homewares and jewelry.

Talabartería Crespo (☎ 421-5447; Obispo Trejo 141; ⏷ Mon-Sat) Leather goods made from *carpincho* (a large rodent that makes a beautifully spotted leather) are the specialty here. Sweaters, knives and *mate* (tealike beverages) paraphernalia grace the shelves as well.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Córdoba's international airport, **Ingeniero Ambrosio Taravella** (☎ 434-8390), charges a AR$116 departure tax on all international departures.

Aerolíneas Argentinas/Austral (☎ /fax 482-1025; Av Colón 520) has offices downtown and flies several times daily to Buenos Aires (from AR$400). **Lan** (☎ 452-3030; Av Alcorta 206) flies daily to Buenos Aires (AR$366) and Santiago, Chile (one-way AR$1600). **Sol** (☎ 0810-122-7765; www.sol.com.ar) flies to Rosario (AR$264), Tucumán (AR$254) and Mendoza (AR$250). **Andes Líneas Aéreas** (☎ 426-5809; www.andesonline.com; Colón 532) flies to Salta (AR$320) and Puerto Iguazú (AR$470). **Aero Chaco** (☎ 0810-345-2422; www.aerochaco.net) flies to Resistencia (AR$341) and plans to add flights to El Calafate and Iguazú.

Bus

Córdoba's **bus terminal** (NETOC; ☎ 423-4199, 423-0532; Blvd Perón 300) is about a 15-minute walk from downtown. **Rede Ticket** (Obispo Trejo 327) sells tickets for all the major bus companies without charging commission. Its downtown location is handy for booking in advance.

Sierras del Córdoba, Sierras de Calamuchita and Transportes La Cumbre all serve Córdoba's mountain hinterlands, including Villa General Belgrano (AR$18, two hours) and Mina Clavero (AR$35, three hours). Their offices are on the top floor of the terminal. Other nearby destinations in the Sierras are easier and more quickly reached from the Mercado Sud minibus terminal (see p318).

There are several daily departures to the destinations listed following. Check the **bus terminal tourist office** (☎ 433-1980) for the best deals, cheapest fares and quality services.

Destination	Cost (AR$)	Duration (hr)
Bahía Blanca	160	12
Bariloche	254	22
Buenos Aires	160	10
Catamarca	73	5-6
Corrientes	175	12
Esquel	375	25
Formosa	166	12
Jujuy	176	12
La Rioja	73	7
Mendoza	100	10
Merlo	45	5½
Montevideo (Uruguay)	190	15
Neuquén	200	17
Paraná	67	6
Puerto Iguazú	296	22
Puerto Madryn	260	18-20
Resistencia	140	13
Río Gallegos	430	40
Rosario	71	6
Salta	182	12
San Juan	105	14
San Luis	65	6
San Martín de los Andes	292	21
Santiago del Estero	77	6
Tucumán	106	8

Several companies offer service to Chilean destinations, including Santiago (AR$180, 16 hours) and Valparaiso (AR$100, 16 hours), though most involve changing buses in Mendoza.

Minibus

Frequent minibuses leave from **Mercado Sud minibus terminal** (Blvd Illia, near Buenos Aires). Some of these go direct, while others stop at every little town along the way. It's worth asking, as this can shave an hour off your travel time.

In summer there may be direct buses to La Cumbrecita, but it will probably be quicker to go first to Villa General Belgrano.

Destination	Cost (AR$)	Duration (hr)
Alta Gracia	7	1
Capilla del Monte	23	3
Cosquín	13	1¼
Jesús María	9	1
La Falda	17	3
La Cumbre	20	3
Mina Clavero	35	3
Villa Carlos Paz	6	1
Villa General Belgrano	18	2

Train

Trains leave Córdoba's **Estación Ferrocarril Mitre** (☎ 426-3565; Blvd Perón s/n) for Rosario (AR$22/35/70 in *turista/primera/*Pullman class, eight hours) and Buenos Aires' Retiro station (AR$30/50/90/150 in *turista/primera/* Pullman/*camarote,* 15 hours) at 4:20pm and 8pm on Wednesday and Sunday. There is a dining car and bar on board. Tickets often sell out weeks in advance, especially in the *camarote* (two-person sleeping cabin), so book as soon as possible.

Trains to Cosquín (AR$6, two hours) leave from **Estación Rodriguez del Busto** (☎ 568-8979; Cardeñosa 3500) on the northwest outskirts of town at 10:50am daily. Buses A4 and A7 from the central plaza go to the station or it's an AR$18 taxi ride.

GETTING AROUND

The airport is 15km north of town via Av Monseñor Pablo Cabrera. Intercórdoba goes to/from the airport from the main bus station (AR$3). A taxi into town shouldn't cost you more than AR$25.

Buses require *cospeles* (tokens), available for AR$1.50 from nearly every kiosk in town.

Bike hire is available from **Córdoba Rent a Bike** (☎ 421-8012; cordobarentabike@gmail.com; San Martín 5), inside the lottery agency. Rates are AR$30/50 per half-/full day with an AR$400 deposit.

A car is very useful for visiting some of the nearby Jesuit *estancias* that cannot be reached by bus. Depending on seasonal demand, economy cars cost around AR$200 with 200km. Try the following:

Alamo (☎ 499-8436; Sheraton Hotel, Duarte Quirós 1300)

Europcar (☎ 422-4867, 481-7683; Entre Ríos 70) Inside Hotel Dora.

THE CENTRAL SIERRAS

Nowhere near as visually spectacular as the nearby Andes, the Central Sierras more than make up for it by being way more hospitable. The area is dotted with little towns that are worth a quick visit or a longer stay, and is connected by an excellent road network with frequent bus services.

From the hippy-chic of paragliding capital La Cumbre to the over-the-top kitsch of Villa Carlos Paz, you'd have to be one jaded traveler not to find something to your liking here. Kicking back is easily done – the riverside village of Mina Clavero is a favorite, as are the ex-Jesuit centers of Alta Gracia and Jesús María. Things get decidedly Germanic down south, and the pedestrian-only La Cumbrecita is not to be missed for *spaetzle* (German egg noodles), bush walks and swimming holes.

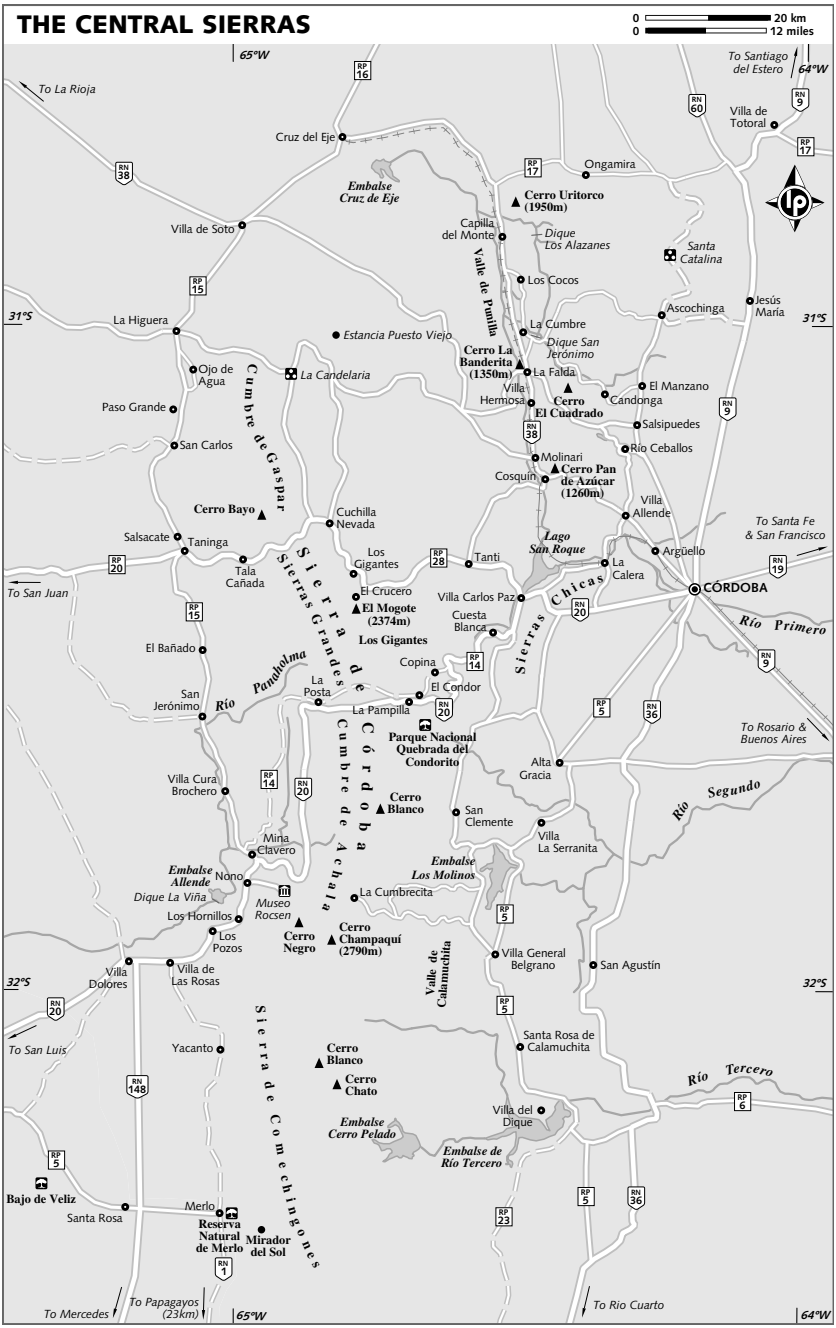
VILLA CARLOS PAZ

☎ 03541 / pop 81,670 / elev 600m

Not everybody gets a chance to go to Vegas, but you might be able to satiate a little of your thirst for kitsch in this summer resort town 36km west of Córdoba. Villa Carlos Paz, set on the shores of so-called Lago San Roque (in reality a large reservoir), has architectural excesses including hotels shaped like pyramids and the Kremlin, and the town's pride and joy, a monstrous cuckoo clock (*reloj cu-cu* for the Spanish speakers out there). In summer, hordes of Argentines crowd Carlos Paz's lakeshores, pack its dance floors and whiz around in miniature trains on city tours. Foreigners generally find it less appealing.

A **telesilla** (chairlift; ☎ 422254; Sanchez & San Antonio; return ticket AR$20; 🕒 10am-6pm) takes you to the top of Cerro Carlos Paz for a bird's-eye view over town. There's a pricey cafe and a couple of short, well-signposted walking trails at the top.

The **tourist office** (☎ 436430; cnr San Martín & Yrigoyen; 🕒 7am-11pm summer, to 9pm rest of yr) distributes useful maps and guides to local services (which are plentiful).


THE CENTRAL SIERRAS
0 20 km
0 12 miles
65°W
64°W
31°S
32°S
To La Rioja
To Santiago del Estero
To San Juan
To San Luis
To Mercedes
To Papagayos (23km)
To Rio Cuarto
To Santa Fe & San Francisco
To Rosario & Buenos Aires
Cruz del Eje
Villa de Soto
Embalse Cruz de Eje
Ongamira
Cerro Uritorco (1950m)
Capilla del Monte
Dique Los Alazanes
Santa Catalina
Villa de Totoral
Valle de Punilla
Los Cocos
Ascochinga
Jesús María
La Higuera
Estancia Puesto Viejo
La Cumbre
Dique San Jerónimo
Cerro La Banderita (1350m)
La Falda
Ojo de Agua
La Candelaria
Villa Hermosa
Cerro El Cuadrado
El Manzano
Candonga
Paso Grande
Salsipuedes
San Carlos
Río Ceballos
Molinari
Cosquín
Cerro Pan de Azúcar (1260m)
Villa Allende
Cerro Bayo
Cuchilla Nevada
Salsacate
Taninga
Tala Cañada
Los Gigantes
Tanti
Lago San Roque
La Calera
Argüello
CÓRDOBA
El Crucero
El Mogote (2374m)
Villa Carlos Paz
Cuesta Blanca
Los Gigantes
El Bañado
Río Primero
Copina
El Condor
La Posta
San Jerónimo
Río Panaholma
La Pampilla
Parque Nacional Quebrada del Condorito
Alta Gracia
Villa Cura Brochero
Cerro Blanco
San Clemente
Villa La Serranita
Río Segundo
Mina Clavero
Embalse Allende
Nono
Dique La Viña
Museo Rocsen
La Cumbrecita
Embalse Los Molinos
Los Hornillos
Los Pozos
Cerro Negro
Cerro Champaquí (2790m)
Villa General Belgrano
San Agustín
Villa Dolores
Villa de Las Rosas
Valle de Calamuchita
Yacanto
Cerro Blanco
Cerro Chato
Santa Rosa de Calamuchita
Río Tercero
Villa del Dique
Embalse Cerro Pelado
Embalse de Río Tercero
Bajo de Veliz
Merlo
Santa Rosa
Reserva Natural de Merlo
Mirador del Sol
Sierra de Comechingones
Sierras Grandes de Córdoba
Cumbre de Achala
Cumbre de Gaspar
Sierras Chicas

DETOUR: LOS GIGANTES

This spectacular group of rock formations, 80km west of Córdoba, is fast becoming Argentina's rock-climbing capital. The two highest peaks are the granite giants of Cerro de La Cruz (2185m) and El Mogote (2374m). There are numerous Andean condors – the park is only 30km from Parque Nacional Quebrada del Condorito, and the birds have slowly taken to this area as well. The area is home to the tabaquillo tree, with its papery peeling bark, which is endangered in Argentina and only found here and in Bolivia and Peru.

Getting here is complicated. **Sarmiento** (☎ 0351-433-2161) buses leave Córdoba's main bus terminal at 8am Wednesday to Monday and 6am on Tuesday (AR$18, two hours). The bus pretty much turns around and comes back again, meaning you have to spend the night. Schedules change frequently, so be sure to check.

Get off at El Crucero (tell the driver you're going to Los Gigantes). From there it's a 3km walk to La Rotonda, where there is a super-basic **hospedaje** (☎ 03541-498370; camp site per person AR$6, dm AR$25, per person kitchen use AR$5) and a small store (beer, soft drinks and snacks only), which is open on weekends.

At La Rotonda you can hire guides (AR$40) to show you around the cave complexes and take you to the top of Cerro de La Cruz. It's not a long hike, but there is some tricky rock scrambling involved. Guides are recommended because the maze of trails through the rocks can be hard to follow and if the fog comes down, you can easily get lost.

Probably the best and easiest way to see the area is by taking a trip with Latitud Sur (p314) in Córdoba, whose excellent staff knows the area well.

Carlos Paz has some excellent hotels, but they're packed through the summer. **Carlos Paz Hostel** (☎ 436023; www.carlospazhostel.com.ar; Lugones 72; dm AR$40; 📶 🚭) It's a modern house converted into a hostel, located up the hill from the bus terminal. The dorms are OK, the kitchen's well set up and there are awesome views from the rooftop terrace.

Nuevo Hotel Italiano (☎ 422202; www.nuevohotelitaliano.com.ar; Uruguay 253; s/d AR$100/130; ❄ 🚭) A sweet little hotel oozing with character – a quantity in fairly short supply in this town. Rooms are cool and quiet, despite its central, main-road location. The pool area (with bar service) is a definite bonus.

The *costanera* (waterfront) is lined with *parrillas, tenedor libres* (all-you-can-eat places) and more upscale restaurants.

La Playa (Costanera s/n; mains AR$20-35; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This laid-back restaurant, with tables out on the waterfront shaded by palm-thatch umbrellas, is one of the more atmospheric places to eat. Bonuses include a swimming pool and sandy lake beach. Live bands play on weekend nights in summer.

Buses go to Córdoba (AR$13, one hour, every 15 minutes) from the **bus terminal** (San Martín 400). There are also regular services to Cosquín (AR$6, 40 minutes) and other towns along the Valle de Punilla, Alta Gracia (AR$6, one hour) and Buenos Aires (AR$106, 11 hours).

COSQUÍN

☎ 03541 / pop 21,300 / elev 720m

Cosquín is known throughout the country for its **Festival Nacional del Folklore** (www.aquicosquin.org), a nine-day national folk-music festival which has been held in the last week of January since 1961. The town gets packed for the festival, stays busy all summer and goes pleasantly dead the rest of the year. The slightly more hard-core **Cosquín Rock Festival** used to be held here, until the neighbors decided that teenagers with wallet chains, studded wristbands and piercings weren't really the tourist trade they were looking for. The festival relocated a few years ago to the banks of the nearby (and aptly named) Lago San Roque.

East of town, 1260m **Cerro Pan de Azúcar** offers good views of the sierras and, on a clear day, the city of Córdoba. An **aerosilla** (chairlift; return ticket AR$20; 🕒 9am-1pm & 3-5pm) runs to the summit regularly in summer – check with the tourist office in the off season. A taxi to the base should cost about AR$50, including waiting time.

Across the river from the center of town (turn left after the bridge), Av Belgrano forms 4km of waterfront promenade – a great place for a stroll on a summer's day, dotted with swimming holes that pack out when the temperature rises.

The **municipal tourist office** (☎ 453701; www.cosquin.gov.ar; San Martín 560; 🕒 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun) has a good map of the town.

Sleeping & Eating

Residencial Ale (☎ 450232; Tucumán 809; s/d AR$45/70) A friendly, family-run budget option. Floors are wooden, beds old and there are no frills whatsoever.

Hospedaje Petit (☎ 451311; petithotel@infocosquin.com.ar; A Sabattini 739; s/d AR$80/100) Steepled roofs and lovely antique floor tiles in the lobby give way to some fairly ordinary, modern rooms in the interior. It's decent value, though – clean, spacious and central.

Hostería Siempreverde (☎ 450093; hosteriasiempreverde.com; Santa Fe 525; s/d AR$100/120) This lovely old house has good-sized, modern rooms out back. There's a big, shady garden and the breakfast/lounge area is comfortable and stylish.

San Martín, between the plaza and the stadium, is lined with cafes, restaurants and *parrillas*.

Confíteria Munich (cnr San Martín & Sarmiento; sandwiches from AR$10; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) An atmospheric plaza-side cafe-bar, the Munich is a great place to grab a table in the late afternoon and watch the world go by.

Mama Rosa (Perón & Catamarca; mains AR$25-35; 🕒 lunch & dinner) The most frequently recommended *parrilla* looks like a barn from the outside, but the excellent service and warm atmosphere help lend it a touch of intimacy

Getting There & Away

There are many daily departures north to La Falda (AR$6, 45 minutes) and La Cumbre (AR$8, 1¼ hours); and south every 20 minutes to Villa Carlos Paz (AR$6, 40 minutes) and Córdoba (AR$10, 1¼ hours). There are a few departures daily for Buenos Aires (AR$107, 11 hours).

Trains depart for Córdoba's Estación Rodriguez del Busto (AR$6, 2½ hours) at 2pm daily.

LA FALDA

☎ 03548 / pop 16,300 / elev 934m

A woodsy resort town, La Falda is busier than its Central Sierra neighbors and not quite as interesting. It's worth a day or two, though, for walks in the hills and around the grounds of the defunct Hotel Eden.

La Falda's main **plaza** (cnr Sarmiento & Rivadavia) is a charming, tranquil affair, all the more so for being removed from the main drag. On weekends, and daily in summer, there's a **feria artisanal** (🕒 daylight hr) here.

The **tourist office** (☎ 423007; www.lafalda.gov.ar; Av España 50; 🕒 8am-8:30pm) is very helpful and has excellent maps of the area.

Sights & Activities

A favorite **hiking** trail takes about two hours to the nearby summit of 1350m Cerro La Banderita. And since you're in town, take a guided tour of the once-extravagant, now-decaying **Hotel Eden** (admission by tour AR$20; 🕒 10am-noon & 2-4pm summer, 10am-noon & 2-4pm Fri-Sun winter), built in 1897, where the guest list included Albert Einstein, the duke of Savoy and several Argentine presidents. Inside the hotel is the **Miniature Train Museum**, a strangely captivating museum devoted to, you guessed it, very small trains. From the hotel, follow signs to **El Chorito**, a lookout with spectacular views out over the Sierras Chicas.

When the weather heats up, locals and tourists alike head for **7 Cascadas** (admission AR$5; 🕒 daylight hr), which has three pools and a variety of swimming holes under waterfalls that were created when the local dam was built. It's a 3km walk or AR$12 taxi ride from town.

Sleeping & Eating

Hostería Marina (☎ 422640; Guëmes 144; r per person AR$40; 🚭) The rooms are on the small side, but this is an excellent budget deal – clean and quiet, with a decent-sized swimming pool in the front yard.

Residencial Old Garden (☎ 422842; Capital Federal 28; s/d AR$120/150; 🚭) Definitely one of the better accommodation deals in the country, this is a beautiful old house, lovingly maintained by the live-in owners. The whole place is charming, right down to the fuzzy dogs running around the large gardens.

our pick **La Bordolesa** (cnr Sarmiento & Saavedra; mains from AR$20; 🕒 lunch & dinner) A laid-back, modern *parrilla* with two grills going – one inside and one out. If the weather's good, grab a table on the lawn and a platter of *picadas* (finger food: AR$25 for two) – it's a fine way to while away a few hours.

Meat dodgers will be very relieved at the sight of **Pachamama** (Av Eden 127; 🕒 9am-3pm), a vegetarian restaurant and health-food store on the main street.

Getting There & Away

The bus terminal sits on RN 38, just north of Av Eden. There are regular buses and minibuses south to Cosquín (AR$6, 45 minutes), Villa Carlos Paz (AR$9, 1¼ hours) and Córdoba (AR$17, two hours), and north to La Cumbre (AR$4.50, 30 minutes) and Capilla del Monte (AR$6, one hour). There are regular long-distance runs to Buenos Aires (from AR$110, 12 hours) and other destinations.

LA CUMBRE

☎ 03548 / pop 9800 / elev 1141m

A favorite getaway for Córdoba dwellers and foreigners alike, La Cumbre packs a lot of character into a small space. It's an agreeable little town due to its wide streets and mild mountain climate, and there are plenty of adventures to be had in the surrounding hills. The town gained worldwide fame when it hosted the 1994 World Paragliding Cup, and enthusiasts of the sport have made La Cumbre their home, giving the town an international feel. The launch site, 380m above the Río Pinto, provides a spectacular introduction to the sport and there are plenty of experienced instructors around, offering both classes and tandem flights.

Information

Banco de la Provincia de Córdoba (cnr López y Planes & 25 de Mayo) Has an ATM.

Tourist office (☎ 452966; www.lacumbre.gov.ar; Av Caraffa 300; 🕗 8am-9pm Apr-Jun & Aug-Nov, to midnight Dec-Mar & Jul) Across from the bus terminal in the old train station. Friendly staff will supply a handy map of the town and surroundings.

Sights & Activities

Head to the south side of town to the road known as **Camino de los Artesanos**, where more than two dozen homes sell homemade goodies, from jams and chutneys to wool, leather and silver crafts. Most homes open from 11am to sunset.

There are excellent views from the **Cristo Redentor**, a 7m statue of Christ on a 300m hilltop east of town; from the Plaza 25 de Mayo, cross the river and walk east on Córdoba toward the mountains – the trail begins after a quick jut to the left after crossing Cabrera.

PARAGLIDING & SKY DIVING

Flying from the launch at Cuchi Corral (and hanging out by the Río Pinto afterward) is truly a memorable experience. The launch site (La Rampa) is about 10km west of town via a signed dirt road off the highway. Both Pablo Jaraba (El Turco) at **Taller de las Nubes** (☎ 03548-15-570951; www.cuchicorral.com) and **Fechu** (☎ 03548-15-574568) offer tandem flights and lessons. Everyone charges about the same. Tandem flights cost AR$250 for a half-hour; full courses cost AR$3000.

At the **Aeroclub La Cumbre** (☎ 452544; Camino a los Troncos s/n) you can arrange everything from tandem flights to ultralights. Ask for Andy Hediger (former paragliding world champion) or Hernán Pitocco (number four in the world in paragliding acrobatics). You can also test your nerves parachuting with **Nicolás López** (☎ 452544; www.redbullaerobatix.com, in Spanish).

HORSEBACK RIDING, TREKKING & MOUNTAIN BIKING

La Chacra (☎ 451703; Pje Beiró s/n) and Estancia El Viejo Piquete (opposite) offer horseback excursions lasting from a few hours to multiple days. Prices run about AR$90 for a half-day excursion and AR$450 for two days, including a full *asado* (barbeque) in the mountains.

Hacer Cumbre (☎ 452907; www.hacercumbre.com; Caraffa 270) rents good-quality mountain bikes (AR$60 per day) and offers guided rides in the breathtaking countryside around Cerro Ongamina, which you can combine with trekking, horseback riding and 4WD offroading. Day trips, including transfers and food, start at AR$500 for two people and become significantly cheaper if you get a group together.

Sleeping

The proprietors of the following places can arrange any activities available in La Cumbre.

Camping El Cristo (☎ 451893; Monseñor P Cabrera s/n; camp sites AR$10) Below the Cristo Redentor east of town, La Cumbre's exceptional campgrounds are only a short tramp from the center.

our pick **Hostel La Cumbre** (☎ 451368; www.hostellacumbre.com; San Martín 186; dm AR$40, d with/without bathroom AR$130/120; 🛜) A couple of blocks behind the bus terminal, this converted English mansion is one of the most impressive hostels in the Sierras. Views from the front balcony are superb.

Hostería Plaza (☎ 451252; www.hosteriaplaza.com.ar; Cuesta 538; s/d AR$100/120; 🛜) A friendly, family-run hotel on a quiet street overlooking the plaza. Rooms are spacious, if not quite

palatial, and the whole place is decked out with homey decorations. The small pool in the front yard can serve for a quick dip.

Estancia El Viejo Piquete (☎ 03548-15-635948; elviejopiquete@yahoo.com.ar; via Calle Mons Pablo Cabrera; d with full board AR$360) For a relaxing stay in a divine location about 2.5km north of town, treat yourself to a night or two at this remote three-room *estancia* with fabulous views over the Valle de Punilla. Horseback riding, hiking and other excursions are offered for guests and nonguests alike.

Eating & Drinking

Casa Caraffa (cnr Caraffa & Rivadavia; mains AR$20-30; ✆ lunch & dinner) An excellent main-street restaurant serving up delicious homemade pastas and a divine *bife de chorizo* (sirloin steak) with Roquefort sauce (AR$25).

Kasbah (Alberdi & Sarmiento; mains from AR$30; ✆ lunch & dinner) You may not be expecting a good Thai curry way out here, but this cute little triangular restaurant comes up with the goods. Also on offer is a range of Chinese and Indian dishes.

El Pungo (☎ 451378; www.elpungopub.com.ar; Camino de los Artesanos s/n; cover from AR$15; ✆ noon-late Sat & Sun) This somewhat legendary watering hole attracts musicians from all over the country (Argentine folk musicians Charly Garcia and Fito Paez have played here).

Getting There & Away

Buses depart regularly from La Cumbre's convenient **bus terminal** (General Paz, near Caraffa), heading northward to Capilla del Monte (AR$4, 30 minutes) or south to La Falda (AR$4.50, 30 minutes), Cosquín (AR$6, 1¼ hours), Villa Carlos Paz (AR$10, 1½ hours) and Córdoba (AR$20, 2½ hours). Minibuses (which take about half an hour less) are the fastest way to Córdoba. There is also direct service to Buenos Aires (AR$115, 12½ hours).

AROUND LA CUMBRE

Capilla del Monte

This attractive town (elevation 979m), 18km north of La Cumbre on the RN 38, not only attracts paragliders and outdoor enthusiasts to its surrounding countryside, but reputedly

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

It's not just the freaks and hippies. Even normal-looking people in Capilla del Monte have stories about strange lights appearing in formation in the night skies over nearby Cerro Uritorco. The stories go way back, too. In 1935 Manuel Reina reported seeing a strange being dressed in a tight-fitting suit while he was out walking on a country road. In 1986 Gabriel and Esperanza Gómez saw a spaceship so big that its lights illuminated the surrounding countryside. The next day a burn mark measuring 122m by 64m was found at the point where it reportedly landed.

A couple of years later, 300 people witnessed another ship, which left a burn mark 42m in diameter. And in 1991, another burn mark was found. This one measured 12m in diameter, with a temperature of 340°C. Geologists were called in and they claimed that nearby rocks had recently been heated to a temperature of 3000°C.

Why all this activity around Capilla del Monte? This is where it gets really weird. One theory is that *Ovnis* (UFOs) visit the area because Cerro Uritorco is where the knight Parsifal brought the Holy Grail and the Templar Cross at the end of the 12th century. He did this to lay them beside the Cane of Order, which had been made 8000 years before by Lord Voltán of the Comechingones, the indigenous tribe that inhabited this region.

Another theory offers that they are drawn here because underneath Uritorco lies Erks, a subterranean city which, according to 'hermetic scientists' is where the future regeneration of the human species will take place. Inside you'll find the Esfera Temple and the three mirrors used to exchange data with other galaxies, and where you can see the details of the life of every human being.

The official explanation? Good ol' meteorological phenomena, caused by supercharged ion particles in the atmosphere, mixed in with a healthy touch of mass hysteria.

Whatever you believe, one thing's for sure – all this hype isn't hurting little Capilla del Monte's tourist industry one bit. Recently, the only people climbing Uritorco were goatherds and a few interested townsfolk. These days, numbers can approach 1000 per day, all hoping to catch a glimpse of the mysterious lights.

receives frequent visits from *Ovnis* (UFOs) as well, most frequently to the nearby 1950m **Cerro Uritorco** (admission AR$20), the highest peak in the Sierras Chicas. The 5km hike to the top affords spectacular views. Catch a taxi or walk the 3km to the base of the mountain. You must start the climb before midday, and begin your descent by 3pm.

Capilla del Monte itself has plenty of restaurants and lodging – the **tourist office** (☎ 03548-481903; www.capilladelmonte.gov.ar; cnr Av Pueyrredón & Buenos Aires) in the old train station has mounds of information. All that UFO activity has attracted its fair share of esoteric practitioners offering alternative treatments, massage and yoga retreats alongside Zen and Tantric temples. For more info on UFOs in the area, drop in to the **Centro de Informes Ovni** (☎ 482485; www.ciouritorco.org; 🕒 10am-4pm).

There is frequent bus service south to Córdoba (AR$30, three hours), stopping at all towns on the RN 38, and long-distance service to Buenos Aires.

Estancia Puesto Viejo

Billing itself as the only youth hostel set on an *estancia* in Argentina, this working **ranch** (☎ 03548-423809, 03548-15-566504; www.estanciapuestoviejo.com; dm/d AR$45/170) gives you the chance to live the gaucho dream without paying the deluxe prices that usually accompany it. All the farm-life activities are here – herding cattle, horseback riding etc, or you can just kick back and enjoy the scenery. Also on offer are 4WD tours to the little-visited Jesuit mission at La Candelaria, gold mine tours and trekking on Cerro Colorado. Simple, hearty meals (AR$55 per day) are available and you can use the kitchen.

Access is a little tricky – from La Cumbre you have to take a taxi (one way AR$120, 24km), but call first to see if the owners are in town and can give you a ride.

JESÚS MARÍA

☎ 03525 / pop 28,300

Sleepy little Jesús María earns its place on the map by being home to one of the most atmospheric Jesuit *estancias* in the region – the Unesco-listed **Museo Jesuítico Nacional de Jesús María** (☎ 420126; admission AR$10; 🕒 8am-7pm Tue-Fri, 10am-noon & 3-7pm Sat & Sun). The church and convent were built in 1618 and are set on superbly landscaped grounds. The Jesuits, after losing their operating capital to pirates off the Brazilian coast, sold wine they made here to support their university in colonial Córdoba. The museum has good archaeological pieces from indigenous groups throughout Argentina, informative maps of the missionary trajectory and well-restored (though dubiously authentic) rooms.

Jesús María is also home to the annual **Fiesta Nacional de Doma y Folklore** (www.festivaljesusmaria.com), a 10-day celebration of gaucho horsemanship and customs beginning the first weekend of January. The festival draws crowds from all over the country, and accusations of animal cruelty from animal-rights groups, who argue that whipping horses and making them perform acrobatics in front of noisy crowds under bright lights is tantamount to torture. Or to gaucho culture.

Most people do Jesús María as a day trip from Córdoba. Frequent minibuses (AR$9, one hour) leave Córdoba's Mercado Sud terminal and bus terminal (see p317) daily.

ESTANCIA SANTA CATALINA

☎ 03525

One of the most beautiful of the Sierra's Unesco World Heritage sites, the Jesuit *estancia* of **Santa Catalina** (☎ 421600; www.santacatalina.info; admission AR$5-15; 🕒 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Fri, closed Jan, Feb, Jul & Semana Santa), some 20km northwest of Jesús María, is a quiet, tiny place, where the village store occupies part of the *estancia,* and old-timers sit on the benches outside and watch the occasional gaucho ride past on a horse. Much of the *estancia* is off-limits to visitors, but guided **tours** (each site AR$5) are available, taking in the chapel, cloisters and novitiate, where unmarried slave girls were housed.

The grounds themselves, while a fraction of their former selves, are lovely and well maintained and you can easily while away an hour or two wandering around. Outside the *estancia,* around the back, is the original reservoir built by the Jesuits, now slowly being overtaken by tall-stemmed lilies.

Santa Catalina is the only Unesco World Heritage *estancia* still under private ownership. Part of the family owns and operates **La Ranchería de Santa Catalina** (☎ 424467, 03525-15-538957; r per person without bathroom AR$120), a lovely inn, restaurant (meals around AR$30) and crafts store in the *ranchería*. It has only two rooms, which occupy the former slave quarters and, while small, are carefully decorated and retain their original stone walls. Three more

rooms with bathrooms are being constructed, using traditional techniques. The place is run by a friendly couple who are more than willing to fill you in on the illustrious story of the *estancia*, from Jesuit times to the present.

A taxi out here from Jesús María costs about AR$75.

ALTA GRACIA

☎ 03547 / pop 42,900 / elev 550m

Set around a 17th-century Jesuit reservoir, Alta Gracia is a tranquil little mountain town of winding streets and shady parks. The star attraction here is the 17th-century Jesuit *estancia*, whose exquisite church, nighttime lighting, and lovely location between a tiny reservoir and the central plaza make it one of the most impressive of Córdoba province's Unesco World Heritage sites. Revolutionary Che Guevara spent his adolescence in Alta Gracia and his former home is now a museum. Most visitors find a day enough and head back to Córdoba for the night.

The **tourist office** (☎ 428128; www.altagracia.gov.ar; Reloj Público, cnr Av del Tajamar & Calle del Molino; 🕒 7am-10:30pm summer, to 7pm winter) occupies an office in the clock tower.

Sights & Activities

THE JESUIT ESTANCIA

From 1643 to 1762, Jesuit fathers built the **Iglesia Parroquial Nuestra Señora de la Merced** (west side of Plaza Manuel Solares; admission free), the *estancia's* most impressive building. Directly south of the church, the colonial Jesuit workshops of **El Obraje** (1643) are now a public school. Beside the church is the **Museo Histórico Nacional del Virrey Liniers** (☎ 421303; www.museoliniers.org.ar; admission AR$10, Wed free; 🕒 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Tue-Fri, 9:30am-12:30pm & 3:30-6:30pm Sat, Sun & holidays), named after former resident Virrey Liniers, one of the last officials to occupy the post of Viceroy of the River Plate. If you want to know every last historical detail, guided tours in English (AR$30 per person; held at 10am, 11:30am, 3:30pm and 5pm) are available

THE LEGEND OF CHE GUEVARA

One of Cuba's greatest revolutionary heroes, in some ways even eclipsing Fidel Castro himself, was an Argentine. Ernesto Guevara, known by the common Argentine interjection 'che,' was born in Rosario in 1928 and spent his first years in Buenos Aires. In 1932, after Guevara's doctor recommended a drier climate for his severe asthma, Guevara's parents moved to the mountain resort of Alta Gracia, where the young Guevara would spend his adolescence.

He later studied medicine in the capital and, in 1952, spent six months riding a motorcycle around South America, a journey that would steer Guevara's sights beyond middle-class Argentina to the plight of South America's poor. The journal he kept during his trip, now known as *The Motorcycle Diaries*, hit bookstore shelves around the world and inspired the movie of the same name, staring Mexico's Gael García Bernal.

After his journey, Guevara traveled to Central America and fatefully landed in Mexico, where he met Fidel Castro and other exiles. Together the small group would sail to Cuba on a rickety old yacht and begin the revolution that overthrew Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959. Unable to resign himself to the bureaucratic task of building Cuban socialism, Guevara tried, unsuccessfully, to spread revolution in the Congo, Argentina and finally Bolivia, where he was killed in 1967.

Today Che is known less for his eloquent writings and speeches than for his striking black-and-white portrait as the beret-wearing rebel – an image gracing everything from T-shirts to CD covers – taken by photojournalist Alberto Korda in 1960. Although these commercialized versions of Che are hardly a poke at the belly of global capitalism, they have managed to irritate some: Korda sued Smirnoff in 2000 for using his famous photograph to sell vodka, and a 1998 Taco Bell ad, in which a talking, beret-wearing Chihuahua barks 'Viva Gorditas' to a cheering crowd, sparked furor in Miami's Cuban-American community.

In 1997, on the 30th anniversary of Che's death, the Argentine government issued a postage stamp honoring Che's Argentine roots. You can take a look as the stamps, as well as other government-sponsored tributes from around the world, by visiting Alta Gracia's modest but lovely Museo Casa de Ernesto Che Guevara (see p326), inaugurated June 14, 2001, on what would have been Che's 73rd birthday.

and recommended – call to reserve one day in advance. If you just have a passing interest, each room has an information sheet in English, which gives you a fair idea of what's going on.

Directly north of the museum, across Av Belgrano, the **Tajamar** (1659) is one of the city's several 17th-century dams, which together made up the complex system of field irrigation created by the Jesuits.

MUSEO CASA DE ERNESTO CHE GUEVARA

In the 1930s, the family of youthful Ernesto Guevara moved here because a doctor recommended the dry climate for his asthma (see the boxed text, p325). Though Che lived in several houses – including the house in Rosario (p183) where he was born – the family's primary residence was Villa Beatriz, which was recently purchased by the city and restored as this **museum** (☎ 428579; Avellaneda 501; admission AR$5, Tue free; 🕒 2-7pm Mon, 9am-7pm Tue-Sun). Its cozy interior is now adorned with a photographic display of Che's life, and a couple of huge photos commemorating a recent visit from Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez. If you think you've been on the road for a while, check out the map detailing Che's travels through Latin America – whatever you think of the man's politics, you have to admit he was well traveled. A small selection of Che paraphernalia (including cigars, of course) is on sale.

ADVENTURE ACTIVITIES

Rent a Bike (☎ 494194; www.altagraciarentabike.com.ar) does pretty much what its name suggests, for AR$50 per day. Alta Gracia is a good place for bike riding – not much traffic and the two main sights are just far enough apart for it to be a pain to have to walk it.

If all Alta Gracia's history makes you feel like throwing yourself out of a plane, contact recommended local outfit **Paracenter** (☎ 03525-15-5413816; www.paracenter.com.ar), which offers tandem skydives for AR$500.

Sleeping & Eating

A number of hip cafe-bar-restaurants with sidewalk seating are scattered along Av Belgrano in the three blocks downhill from the Jesuit museum.

Alta Gracia Hostel (☎ 428810; www.altagraciahostel.com.ar; Paraguay 218; dm AR$35) Five short blocks downhill from the Jesuit museum, Alta Gracia's hostel offers a fair deal. Dorms are roomy enough and the kitchen should meet your needs. One bizarre inconvenience: you can't check in until noon.

Hostal Hispania (☎ 426555; Av Vélez Sársfield 57; s/d AR$90/170; 🚭) Located in a handsome late-19th-century wooden building, this place boasts spacious rooms that open onto a covered porch (complete with chaise longues) overlooking the large garden. The attached Spanish restaurant is worth a look in, too.

Sol de Polen (☎ 427332; www.hectorcelano.com.ar; Avellaneda 529; mains AR$10-15; 🕒 lunch & dinner) A few short steps from the Che museum, this Cuban-themed restaurant serves up a couple of Cuban dishes alongside all the Argentine standards. Friday nights there's live music and if you really like the place, it rents out basic double rooms at the back for AR$90.

our pick **Morena** (cnr Sarmiento & Funes; mains AR$25-40; 🕒 lunch & dinner) Some of the best eats in town are on offer in the lovely dining salon of this upscale restaurant, a couple of blocks uphill from the reservoir.

Getting There & Away

Minibuses depart regularly for Córdoba (AR$7, one hour) from in front of the clock tower near the main plaza. The **bus terminal** (Tacuarí at Perón) near the river also has departures for Córdoba, as well as Villa Carlos Paz (AR$6, one hour) and Buenos Aires (AR$160, 13 hours). Buses to Villa General Belgrano stop every hour on RP 5, about 20 blocks along Av San Martín from the center.

VILLA GENERAL BELGRANO

☎ 03546 / pop 7400 / elev 820m

More a cultural oddity than a full-blown tourist attraction, Villa General Belgrano flaunts its origins as a settlement of unrepatriated survivors from the German battleship *Graf Spee,* which sank near Montevideo during WWII.

The annual **Oktoberfest** (elevated in 1972 to status of Fiesta Nacional de la Cerveza; National Beer Festival; see http://elsitiodelavilla.com/oktoberfest, in Spanish), held during the first two weeks of October, draws beer lovers from all over the world. In summer the village slowly fills with holidaymakers enjoying the tranquil streets and evergreen-dotted countryside. Unless you're really excited about microbrew beer, *torta selva negra* (black forest cake) and goulash, Villa General Belgrano makes a fine day trip from Córdoba

or nearby La Cumbrecita. Despite its decidedly Germanic flavor, you'd be lucky to hear any of the modern-day inhabitants speaking the language of the old country.

For an overview of the town, make your way up the **tower** (admission AR$2; 9am-8pm) attached to the tourist office.

The **tourist office** (☎ 461215; www.vgb.gov.ar; Plaza José Hernández; 8am-8:30pm) is on the main strip.

Activities

To go horseback riding, look for Sr Martinez, who sets up behind the bus terminal in summer and charges around AR$25 an hour. Otherwise contact **Pituco Sanchez** (☎ 463142), who offers horseback riding year-round at similar prices. **Fiedrich** (Roca 224) rents mountain bikes for AR$8/30 per hour/day.

If you're up for a stroll, a lovely path runs between Corrientes and El Quebracho alongside the Arroyo La Toma, a creek one block downhill from the main street.

Sleeping & Eating

In the December-to-March high season, hotel prices rise and rooms book quickly. Unless you book weeks before Oktoberfest, plan on hitting the festival as a day trip from Córdoba. There are numerous restaurants along the main strip of Julio A Roca and San Martín.

Albergue El Rincón (☎ 461323; rincon@calamuchitanet.com.ar; camp sites AR$10, dm AR$30, r per person AR$36) This beautiful Dutch-owned hostel, surrounded by forest, has excellent, spacious dorm rooms, outdoor and indoor kitchens, a *parrilla* and its own biodynamic farm. Outstanding breakfasts cost AR$10, and lunch and dinner AR$30. It's a good 1km walk from behind the bus terminal to the entrance gate; follow the signs.

Residencial Giovanni Luigi (☎ 462017; Ojo de Agua 35; s/d AR$70/90) An excellent little family-run spot right in the center of town. Rooms could be bigger, but the price can't be beat.

Posada Aitué (☎ 461476; www.elsitiodelavilla.com/aitue; Sársfield 75; s/d from AR$140/170;) This is a lovely Alpine-style chalet a short walk from the center. Pay another AR$60 and you get a sitting room, kitchenette and hydromassage bath.

Nissen (Julio A Roca 36; mains AR$15-25; breakfast, lunch & dinner) A cute little cafe with sunny outdoor seating. Set-meal specials (AR$25) are a good deal.

Blumen (Julio A Roca 373; mains around AR$40; lunch & dinner) With one of the widest menus in town, Blumen serves up good, tasty, if slightly expensive, dishes. It's a great spot for a few drinks – the huge shady beer garden is all wooden tables and pagodas, with plenty of space in between and the microbrew beer flowing readily.

Getting There & Away

The **bus terminal** (Av Vélez Sársfield) is uphill from San Martín, the main thoroughfare. Buses leave every hour for Córdoba (AR$18, two hours), and daily for Buenos Aires (AR$150, 11 hours). **Pajaro Blanco** (☎ 461709) has daily departures for La Cumbrecita (AR$18, two hours).

LA CUMBRECITA

☎ 03546 / pop 320 / elev 1300m

The pace of life slows waaaay down in this alpine-styled village, nestled in the forest in the Valle de Calamuchita. The tranquility is largely thanks to the town's pedestrian-only policy. It's a great place to kick back for a few days and wander the forest trails leading to swimming holes, waterfalls and scenic lookouts.

Visitors must park their cars in the dirt parking lot (AR$6) before crossing the bridge over Río del Medio by foot.

The helpful **tourist office** (☎ 481088; www.lacumbrecita.gov.ar; 8:30am-9pm summer, 10am-6pm winter) is on the left, just after you cross the bridge into town.

Sights & Activities

The best reason to visit La Cumbrecita is to hike. Short trails are well marked and the tourist office offers a crude but useful map of the area. A 25-minute stroll will take you to **La Cascada**, a waterfall tucked into the mountainside. **La Olla** is the closest swimming hole, surrounded by granite rocks (people jump where it's deep enough). **Cerro La Cumbrecita** (1400m) is the highest point in town, about a 20-minute walk from the bridge. Outside town, the highest mountain is the poetically named **Cerro Wank** (1715m); a hike to the top takes about 40 minutes.

For guided hikes further into the mountains, as well as horseback riding (AR$60 for three hours), trout fishing and mountain biking, contact **Viviendo Montañas** (☎ 481172; Las Truchas s/n), which has an office on the main

road in town. The company can also take you trekking to the top of **Cerro Champaquí** (2790m), the highest peak in the sierras, for about AR$100 per person.

If the whole Disneyland feel of La Cumbrecita isn't enough for you, check out **Peñon del Aguila** (☎ 0351-15-552-5232; www.penondelaguila.com.ar; adult/child AR$20/10; 🕒 11am-7pm daily in summer, weekends only rest of yr), a theme park offering 'alpine adventures.' Rappelling, ziplining, a canopy boardwalk, nature trails and waterfalls are all in abundance, cheerfully guided by folks in Tirolese outfits. The whole show wraps up with a sunset song-and-dance spectacular paying homage to Gambrinus, the king of beer. We kid you not.

Sleeping & Eating

La Cumbrecita has more than 20 hotels and *cabañas* in the surrounding hills; the tourist office is a good resource. Make reservations in summer (January and February), during Easter and during Villa General Belgrano's Oktoberfest (see p326).

Hostel El Viaje (☎ 15-573-5085; www.elviajelacumbrecita.com; Calle Principal s/n; dm/d without bathroom AR$45/110) The only hostel in town is a cute, simple place, with a couple of three-bed dorms and one private room.

Hospedaje Casa Rosita (☎ 481003; Calle Principal s/n; s/d without bathroom AR$120/160) A humble little *hospedaje* (family home) set in a charming house by the river at the entrance to the village. If you can, go for room 1, which has a bay window overlooking the river.

Hotel La Cumbrecita (☎ 481052; www.hotelcumbrecita.com.ar; s/d AR$130/260; 🌀 🚭) Built on the site of the first house in La Cumbrecita, this rambling hotel has some excellent views out over the valley. Rooms aren't huge, but most have fantastic balconies. The extensive grounds include a gym and tennis courts. Half pensión (breakfast and dinner) is available for AR$30.

Confitería Tante Liesbeth (☎ 481079; 🕒 4-7:30pm Thu-Sun summer, 4-7:30pm Sat & Sun winter) On the north side of town, on the way to Cerro Wank, this is the village's most traditional teahouse, set creekside among the trees. It's about a 10-minute walk from the entrance to town.

El Paseo (mains AR$25-40; 🕒 lunch & dinner Thu-Sun) Out by the La Olla swimming hole, this place serves up a good *parrilla*, plus all the Germanic standards. It's great for afternoon beer.

Restaurante Bar Suizo (Calle Pública s/n; mains AR$15-35; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Pull up a wooden bench under the pine tree and try some of the excellent Swiss German options such as *spaetzle* with wild mushroom sauce (AR$20).

Getting There & Away

From Villa General Belgrano, **Transportes Pajaro Blanco** (☎ 461709; cnr San Martín & Sarsfield), across and just downhill from the bus terminal, has departures to La Cumbrecita (AR$18, two hours, at 7am, 10am, noon, 4pm and 6:50pm Monday through Friday, and 8am, 10am, noon, 4pm and 6:50pm Saturday and Sunday). In summer there may be occasional minibuses from Córdoba's Mercado Sud terminal (see p318).

PARQUE NACIONAL QUEBRADA DEL CONDORITO

elev 1900-2300m

This national park protects 370 sq km of stunning rocky grasslands across the Pampa de Achala in the Sierras Grandes. The area, particularly the *quebrada* (gorge) itself, is an important condor nesting site and flight training ground for fledgling condors. A 9km, two- to three-hour hike from the park entrance at **La Pampilla** leads to the Balcón Norte (North Balcony), a cliff top over the gorge where you can view the massive birds circling on the thermals rising up the gorge. You can visit easily as a day trip from Córdoba or on your way to Mina Clavero.

Any bus from Córdoba to Mina Clavero will drop you at La Pampilla (AR$18, 1½ hours), where a trailhead leads to the gorge. To return to Córdoba (or on to Mina Clavero), flag a bus from the turnoff. Latitud Sur (p314) offers recommended day tours to the park.

For more information on the park, contact **Intendencia del PN Quebrada del Condorito** (☎ 03541-433371; www.quebradacondorito.com.ar; Sabattini 33) in Villa Carlos Paz.

MINA CLAVERO

☎ 03544 / pop 7350 / elev 915m

Really jumping in summertime, Mina Clavero pretty much empties out for the rest of the year, leaving visitors to explore the limpid streams, rocky waterfalls, numerous swimming holes and idyllic mountain landscapes at their own pace.

Mina Clavero is 170km southwest of Córdoba via RN 20, the splendid Nuevo

Camino de las Altas Cumbres (Highway of the High Peaks). It sits at the confluence of Río de Los Sauces and Río Panaholma, in the Valle de Traslasierra.

The Río Mina Clavero splits the town in two – if you arrive at the bus terminal and are headed for Andamundos Hostel or La Casa de Pipa, take the pedestrian bridge across the river – from there it's only a couple of blocks to the former and a short taxi ride to the latter. Otherwise you have to go the long way around.

The **tourist office** (☎ 470171; www.minaclavero.gov.ar; Av San Martín 1464; 7am-midnight Dec-Mar, 9am-9pm Apr-Nov) has standard brochures and a useful map of town.

Sights & Activities

Mina Clavero's *balnearios* (swimming areas) get mobbed in the summer, but are often empty the rest of the year. The magnificent, boulder-strewn gorges of the Río Mina Clavero are easily explored. A lovely *costanera* has been constructed, running from the pedestrian bridge all the way to the **Nido de Aguila**, the best swimming hole around – this makes for a great afternoon stroll. From there head west along the Río de Los Sauces and you'll hit **Los Elefantes**, a *balneario* named for its elephant-like rock formations. A 3km walk south along the river will take you to the village of **Villa Cura Brochero**, where you'll find black pottery that is characteristic of this region.

Traslasierra Aventura (☎ 471516; www.traslasierra.com/traslasierraaventura; San Martín 1241) offers tours of the nearby Comechingones mountains, condor spotting and horseback riding.

Sleeping

Many accommodations close around the end of March, when the town almost rolls up the sidewalks.

Andamundos Hostel (☎ 470249; www.andamundoshostel.com.ar; San Martín 554; dm/d AR$35/80;) A rustic little setup a couple of blocks from the center of town. The big yard backing on to the river is a bonus.

Hotel Palace (☎ 470390; www.comprasvirtual.com/hotelpalace; Mitre 847; s/d AR$100/130) The highlight of this 40-room French-owned hotel is the huge backyard that slopes to the riverside. Shade trees and lounge chairs make it tough to leave the grounds. Rooms are slightly worn, but the garden makes up for it.

our pick **La Casa de Pipa** (☎ 470480; www.lacasadepipa.com; Hernán Cortés at Colón; s/d AR$150/200; closed May & Jun;) This is a beautiful *hostería* (lodging house) set on mildly sloping grounds. There's plenty of shady spots, a good pool, a couple of barbecues and a lovely sunny breakfast room with views out over the mountains. It's about five blocks uphill from San Martín.

Hotel Rossetti (☎ 470012; www.hotelrossettiyspa.com.ar; Mitre 1434; all-inclusive packages per person AR$250;) A sparkling hotel-spa complex in a slightly unfortunate location on a busy thoroughfare. Summer prices include meals, drinks and spa treatments. Off-season, doubles go for AR$160 (room only) and individual spa treatments cost AR$30 each.

Eating

Most of Mina Clavero's restaurants are along San Martín.

Palenque (San Martín 1191; mains AR$15-30; lunch & dinner) Funky works of art on the walls and live music on the weekends make this a popular spot. It's a great place for drinks and the snacks and meals are a good deal, too.

Cuba Bar (San Martín 1270; mains AR$20-35; lunch & dinner) Out the back of the Galeria Mina Clavero, the Cuba is noteworthy for three things – a decent music selection, a pool table and a great deck overlooking the river.

Don Alonso (cnr San Martín & Recalde; mains AR$20-35; lunch & dinner) The most frequently recommended *parrilla* in town, the Don serves up tasty empanadas and good-value set meals in front of the plaza.

Rincón Suizo (Champaqui 1200; mains AR$25-35; lunch & dinner) This comfy teahouse on the river prides itself on its homemade ice creams, delicious Swiss food (including fondue, raclette and ratatouille) and *torta selva negra*.

Getting There & Away

The **bus terminal** (Mitre 1191) is across the Río Mina Clavero from the town center. There are several daily buses to Córdoba (AR$31, three hours), Villa Carlos Paz (AR$21, 2½ hours) and at least three a day to Merlo (AR$45, 2½ to three hours). Minibuses to Córdoba are faster (AR$30, 2½ hours). **TAC** (☎ 470420) has daily service to Buenos Aires (AR$130, 13 hours). For destinations in San Juan and Mendoza provinces, go to nearby Villa Dolores (AR$12, one hour).

NONO & MUSEO ROCSEN

Operated by Juan Santiago Bouchon, an anthropologist, curator and passionate collector who first came to Argentina in 1950 as cultural attaché to the French embassy, this eclectic **museum** (☎ 03544-498218; www.museorocsen.org; admission AR$8; 🕒 9am-sunset) reveals just how strange the world really is. It contains more than 11,000 pieces, including antique motorcycles, mounted butterflies, Esso gas pumps, human skulls, Buddha statues, film projectors, Catholic altars, 19th-century instruments of torture, a shrunken head and a 1200-year-old Peruvian mummy. It's truly a one-of-a-kind museum, and requires plenty of time to explore.

The museum is 5km outside the pastoral village of **Nono**, a one-time indigenous settlement 8km south of Mina Clavero. There are regular minibuses from Mina Clavero to Nono's main plaza, from where you'll have to take a taxi (about AR$15 one way) or walk to the museum. If you do take a taxi, arrange for the driver to come back for you. A taxi from Mina Clavero to Nono costs AR$20.

SAN LUIS & AROUND

The little-visited province of San Luis holds a surprising number of attractions, made all the better by the fact that you'll probably have them all to yourself.

The province is popularly known as La Puerta de Cuyo (the door to Cuyo), referring to the combined provinces of Mendoza, San Luis and San Juan (see also the boxed text, p339).

The regional superstar is without doubt the Parque Nacional Sierra de las Quijadas, but the mountain towns along the Valle de Conlara and Sierras Puntanas are well worth a visit if you're looking to get off the tourist trail.

MERLO

☎ 02656 / pop 14,400 / elev 890m

At the top of the Valle de Conlara (see p335), the mountain town of Merlo is a growing resort known for its gentle microclimate (the local tourist industry buzzword) in a relatively dry area. The town is located 200km northeast of San Luis, tucked into the northeast corner of San Luis province.

The **municipal tourist office** (☎ 476078; www.villademerlo.gov.ar; Coronel Mercau 605; 🕒 8am-8pm) has maps and information on hotels and campgrounds.

Sights & Activities

For a sweeping view of the town and valley, head up to the Mirador del Sol. Buses leave from the old bus terminal and cost AR$4.50 for the 40-minute ride. If you've got your walking shoes on (or better, have a private vehicle), you can continue on this road another 12km to the Mirador de los Condores, which is up on the mountain ridge, and gives views in both directions. There's a **confiteria** (mains AR$12-25) up here and if the wind is right, you can watch the parasailing maniacs taking off from the nearby launchpad.

Two kilometers from the center, in Rincon del Este, on the road to the Miradors, the **Reserva Natural de Merlo** (admission free; 🕒 daylight hr) is a lovely spot for creekside walks up to a couple of swimming holes. The obligatory ziplines have been installed here and you can go whizzing through the canopy overhead for AR$30. **El Rincon del Paraiso** (set meals AR$15-30; 🕒 breakfast & lunch), about 400m from the park entrance, is a beautiful, shady restaurant in the middle of the park – a great place for lunch or a couple of drinks.

Volando Bajo (☎ 476248; Pringles 459) is the most established of the plethora of tour operators in town. It offers tours to the nearby archaeological/paleontological park at Bajo de Veliz (half-day AR$80), and a trip combining the nature reserve, and Miradors de Sol and de los Condores (half-day AR$60). Tandem parasailing flights cost around AR$200 and last 20 to 30 minutes, depending on wind conditions.

Sleeping

Merlo Hostel (☎ 476928; Av del Sol 1025; dm AR$45; 💻 📶) A sweet little family home–turned-hostel. Dorms could be bigger, but there are good hangout areas, it's an excellent, central location and this is one of the few true budget options in town.

Hostería Cerro Azul (☎ 478648; www.hosteriacerroazul.com.ar; cnr Saturno & Jupiter; s/d AR$120/150; 📶) This bright new hotel just off the main drag offers big rooms with spacious bathrooms and tiny TVs. The lounge-dining area is gorgeous, with high cathedral ceilings.

Hotel Casa Blanca (☎ 475320; www.casablancamerlo.com.ar; Av del Sol 50; s/d from AR$220/250; ❄ 💻 📶) Undergoing a complete overhaul at the time of writing, this large business-style hotel right in the center is set on two hectares of woodsy grounds. It should be the best in town when it reopens.

Eating & Drinking

Cirano (Av del Sol 280; mains AR$15-30; lunch & dinner) Ignore the flashing fairy lights – there are some good-value eats on offer here, and an excellent set lunch or dinner for AR$20.

Giorgio (Av del Sol 558; mains AR$25-40; lunch & dinner) Some excellent, creative mixes here, along with hearty standards such as wild mushroom risotto (AR$28) and *bife de chorizo* (AR$25). Leave room for the tiramisu.

La Cerveceria (Av del Sol 515; 2pm-late) If you're looking for a beer, this is your spot – there's eight different types of microbrew on offer, plus the national and imported standbys, sidewalk seating and snacks.

Getting There & Away

Long-distance buses leave from the **new bus terminal** (RN 1 at Calle de las Ovejas), about eight blocks south of the town center. Departures include the following:

Destination	Cost (AR$)	Duration (hr)
Buenos Aires	120	12
Córdoba	43	6
El Volcán	17	4
La Toma	13	3
Mendoza	77	8
Mina Clavero	45	3
San Luis	35	4
Villa Carlos Paz	39	5

Getting Around

Local buses leave from the **old bus terminal** (492858; cnr Pringles & Los Almendres) in the center of town. There are departures for the Mirador del Sol (AR$5, 40 minutes), Piedra Blanca (AR$2, 20 minutes), Bajo de Veliz (AR$7, one hour), Papagayos (AR$3.50, one hour) and the nearby artisan village of Cerro de Oro (AR$2, 30 minutes).

Merlo Rent a Car (473949; www.merlorentacar.com.ar; cnr Av del Sol & Pelligrini) is the local car-rental operator.

SAN LUIS

02652 / pop 212,400 / elev 700m

Even people from San Luis will tell you that the best the province has to offer lies outside of the capital. That said, it's not a bad little town – there are a few historic sights here and the central Plaza Pringles is one of the prettiest in the country. The town's main nightlife strip, Av Illia, with its concentration of bars, cafes and restaurants, makes for a fun night out.

Orientation

On the north bank of the Río Chorrillos, San Luis is 260km from Mendoza via RN 7 and 456km from Córdoba via RN 148.

The commercial center is along the parallel streets of San Martín and Rivadavia between Plaza Pringles in the north and Plaza Independencia in the south.

Information

Several banks, mostly around Plaza Pringles, have ATMs.

ACA (Automóvil Club Argentino; 423188; Av Illia 401) Auto club; good source for provincial road maps.

Ciber Max (cnr Pedrera & Caseros; per hr AR$3; 8am-5am) For that late-night email binge. There are countless other cybercafes downtown.

Las Quijadas Turismo (431683; San Martín 874) Tours to Parque Nacional Sierra de las Quijadas, La Angostura and Inti Huasi.

Post office (cnr Av Illia & San Martín)

Regional hospital (422627; Av República Oriental del Uruguay 150) On the eastward extension of Bolívar.

Tourist office (423957, 423479; www.turismo.sanluis.gov.ar; intersection of Junín, San Martín & Av Illia; 8am-8pm) The helpful staff can supply a good map of the town and its attractions.

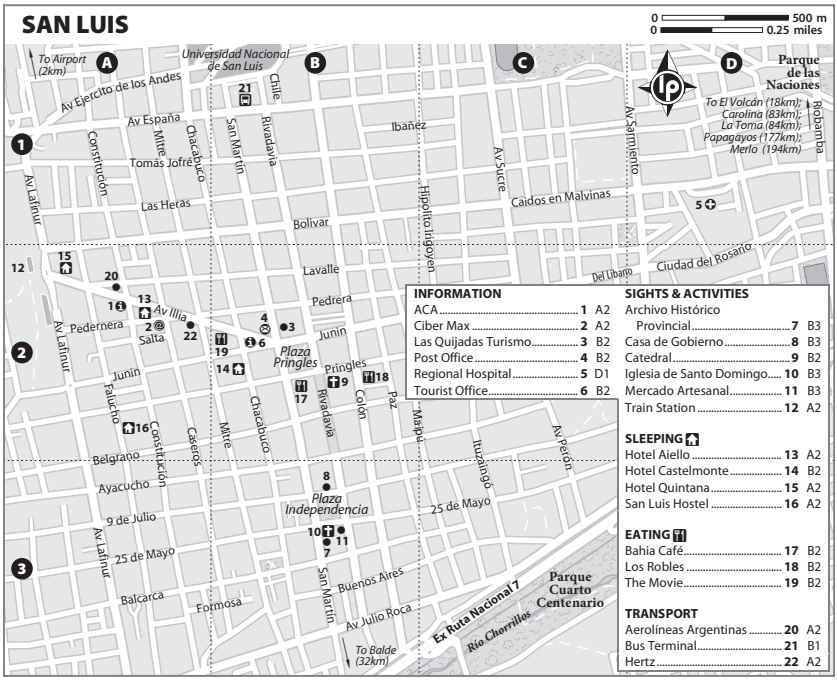
Sights & Activities

The center of town is the beautiful tree-filled Plaza Pringles, anchored on its eastern side by San Luis' handsome 19th-century **cathedral** (Rivadavia). Provincial hardwoods such as algarrobo were used for the cathedral's windows and frames, and local white marble for its steps and columns.

On the north side of nearby Plaza Independencia is the provincial **Casa de Gobierno** (Government House). On the south side of the plaza, the **Iglesia de Santo Domingo** (cnr 25 de Mayo & San Martín) and its convent date from the 1930s, but reproduce the Moorish style of the 17th-century building they replaced. Take a peek at the striking *algarrobo* (carob tree) doors of the attached **Archivo Histórico Provincial** around the corner on San Martín.

Dominican friars at the **mercado artesanal** (cnr 25 de Mayo & Rivadavia; 8am-1pm Mon-Fri), next to Iglesia de Santo Domingo, sell gorgeous handmade wool rugs as well as ceramics, onyx crafts and weavings from elsewhere in the province.

Also stroll over to the lovely former **train station** (Avs Illia & Lafinur) for a look at its green corrugated-metal roofs and decorative ironwork dating from 1884.



Sleeping

San Luis' better hotels cater to a business crowd, filling up quickly on weekdays and offering discounts on weekends.

San Luis Hostel (☎ 424188; www.sanluishostel.com.ar; Falucho 646; dm/tw AR$35/100;) San Luis' best and most central hostel has it all, from pool table to DVD library, excellent kitchen and shady backyard with barbecue. The 16-person dorms (segregated for male and female) could be a bit more atmospheric, but apart from that it's pure gold.

our pick Hotel Castelmonte (☎ 424963; Chacabuco 769; s/d AR$80/110;) An excellent-value mid-range hotel. Its spacious rooms have wooden parquetry floors and firm new beds. While central, it's set back from the road, keeping things nice and quiet.

Hotel Aiello (☎ 425609; www.hotelaiello.com.ar; Av Illia 431; s/d AR$225/250;) With its low-slung hacienda vibe the Aiello has what so many of San Luis' hotels are lacking – character. It's all very comfortable here, with patios spread around and an excellent pool area featuring a kids' pool, a good-sized main pool and a shady grassy corner with deck chairs.

Hotel Quintana (☎ 438400; www.hotelquintana.com.ar; Av Illia 546; s/d AR$320/400;) The best setup hotel in town, the Quintana lays it all out for the business set with a serene lobby area leading on to restaurants, bars and a small pool area out back. Rooms are comfortable but nothing special.

Eating & Drinking

Traditional San Luis dishes include *empanadas de horno* (baked empanadas) and *cazuela de gallina* (chicken soup).

Bahia Café (cnr Pringles & Av San Martín; mains AR$15-25; breakfast, lunch & dinner) For plaza-side cafe action and frenzied, middle-aged waiters, you can't go past the Bahia. At night they put tables out on the plaza in front, making it a great spot for drinks, snacks and people-watching.

The Movie (Av Illia 177; mains from AR$25; 11am-late) A vaguely cheesy 'theme restaurant' that actually turns out some pretty good food. Best thing – it's open very late for full meals and drinks.

Los Robles (Colón 684; mains AR$30-50; lunch & dinner) One of the town's few upmarket *parril-*

las, this one has great atmosphere, attentive service and a menu that goes way beyond the usual offerings.

There are numerous laid-back bars along Av Illia. As is the deal all over the country, they start late and end late. Go for a stroll and see which one you like.

Getting There & Around

AIR

San Luis airport (☎ 422427/57) is 3km northwest of the center; taxis cost around AR$15.

Aerolíneas Argentinas (☎ 425671, 437981; Av Illia 472) flies daily to Buenos Aires (AR$463).

BUS & CAR

Unless it's suddenly moved to the old train station (corner of Avs Illia and Lafinur), San Luis' **bus terminal** (☎ 424021; España, btwn San Martín & Rivadavia) is about six blocks north of the main plaza. Provincial destinations, including Merlo (AR$18, four hours), El Volcán (AR$5, 30 minutes), Carolina (AR$12, two hours), Inti Huasi (AR$15, 2½ hours), La Toma (AR$8 1½ hours) and Balde (AR$4, 45 minutes), are served by local operators, whose ticket offices are in a separate building just in front of the main terminal complex.

There are long-distance departures daily to the destinations in the following table. For destinations such as Neuquén and Bariloche, you must head first to Mendoza or San Rafael.

Destination	Cost (AR$)	Duration (hr)
Buenos Aires	150	11
Córdoba	70	7
Mar del Plata	240	19
Mendoza	40	5
Paraná	120	13
Rosario	120	9
San Juan	45	5
San Rafael	50	5
Santa Fe	150	12

Hertz (☎ 15-549002; Av Illia 305) is the local car-rental agency.

AROUND SAN LUIS

Balde

☎ 02652

This small village, 35km west of San Luis, is remarkable only for its thermal baths. The municipal complex is a decidedly down-at-heel affair, while a new spa resort offers oodles of comfort in gorgeous surrounds.

Centro Termal Municipal (☎ 499319; Av Esteban Agüero s/n; 1hr baths per person AR$8, campsites AR$6, cabin for 2 people AR$75; 🕓 baths 8am-6pm) is a budget-friendly alternative to Los Tamarindos up the road, offering small rooms with a bath and a bed to relax, rented by the hour. They're clean enough and decent value for a quick dip. Cabins (located across the road) are spacious for two, with kitchen facilities, but no thermal water piped in.

Los Tamarindos (☎ 15-664-6628; Av Esteban Agüero s/n; s/d AR$200/260, cabins s/d AR$230/300; 🕓 baths 8am-6pm) is a wonderful thermal baths complex featuring a couple of public pools for day use – an outdoor one at 26°C (AR$15 per person) and a lovely, clean indoor one (AR$30 for both). The rooms here are standard, with small baths fed by hot spring water, but the cabins are a real treat – they're much more spacious and have a separate tub where you can get neck deep in the water. Hotel guests have access to the hot baths included in the price and there are a variety of spa treatments (mudpacks, massages etc) available. The whole complex is set on leafy grounds and is pure relaxation, especially midweek.

Regular buses run to and from San Luis' bus terminal to the bus terminal at Balde (AR$4, 45 minutes), which is a short walk to either of the complexes.

El Volcán

☎ 02652 / pop 1480

A small village nestled in the hills east of San Luis, El Volcán (there is no volcano here, by the way) is a laid-back summer getaway spot. The star attraction is the river that runs through the middle of town, where Balneario La Hoya, a series of natural rock pools, offers shady swimming spots and picnic areas.

El Volcán is close enough to San Luis to make it an easy day trip, but there are plenty of cabins for rent, especially during summer.

Hotel El Volcán (☎ 494044; Banda Norte s/n; s/d AR$180/200; 🎲 🚂) is the only real hotel in the village. It's a sprawling complex set on shady grounds that run down to the river. The hotel closes off-season – call ahead to make sure it's open. **El Mantial** (Balneario La Hoya; mains AR$15-22; 🕓 breakfast, lunch & dinner) has decent food and great views out over the river. Portions are big and service is quick, if somewhat impersonal.

Regular buses run to and from San Luis' main bus terminal (AR$5, 30 minutes).

PARQUE NACIONAL SIERRA DE LAS QUIJADAS

Fans of the Road Runner cartoon will feel oddly at home among the red sandstone rock formations in this rarely visited **national park** (admission AR$25). The park comprises 1500 sq km of canyons and dry lake beds among the Sierra de las Quijadas, whose peaks reach 1200m at Cerro Portillo. Recent paleontological excavations by the Universidad Nacional de San Luis and New York's Museum of Natural History unearthed dinosaur tracks and fossils from the Lower Cretaceous, about 120 million years ago.

Despite the shortage of visitors here, access to the park is excellent: buses from San Luis to San Juan will drop visitors at the park entrance and ranger station (AR$20, 1½ hours) just beyond the village of Hualtarán, about 110km northwest of San Luis via RN 147 (San Juan is 210km to the northwest). At this point, a 6km dirt road leads west to a viewpoint overlooking the **Potrero de la Aguada**, a scenic depression beneath the peaks of the sierra that collects the runoff from much of the park and is a prime wildlife area. At the ranger station you can hire guides; two-hour, 3km treks to see the famous dinosaur footprints leave hourly between 9am and 4pm and cost AR$22 per person. Four-hour treks to a 150m-deep canyon in the park leave at 1:30pm and cost AR$35. A minimum group size of two people applies to both treks.

Other **hiking** possibilities in the park are excellent, but the complex canyons require a tremendous sense of direction or, preferably, the assistance of a local guide. Even experienced hikers should beware of summer rains and flash floods, which make the canyons extremely dangerous.

There's a shady **campground** (campsites free), near the overlook, and a small store with groceries and drinks, including very welcome ice-cold beer.

Buses from San Juan to San Luis pass every hour or so, but they don't always stop. It's sometimes possible to catch a lift from the park entrance to the overlook.

VALLE DE LAS SIERRAS PUNTANAS

From San Luis the RP 9 snakes its way northwards, following the course of the Río Grande. Along the way, small villages are slowly developing as tourist destinations while still retaining much of their original character. The picturesque mining town of Carolina and nearby Inti Huasi cave are highlights of the region, and the landscapes higher up in the valley, with their rolling meadows and stone fences, probably resemble the Scottish highlands more than anything you've seen in Argentina so far.

Estancia Las Verbenas

Set in a gorgeous glade in the Valle de Pancanta, this **estancia** (☎ 02652-430918; RP 9, Km 68; per person incl full board AR$108) does rustic to the hilt, with plenty of hearty food served up among animal-skin decoration and rough-hewn furniture. Rooms are basic but comfortable. Two-hour horseback-riding tours (AR$30 per person) to a nearby waterfall are bound to be a highlight of your stay here. The signposted entrance to the property is just after the bridge on the highway, from where it's another 4km to the farmhouse. If you're coming by bus, call and staff will pick you up from the highway.

Carolina

☎ 02651 / pop 230 / elev 1610m

Nestled between the banks of the Río Grande and the foothills of Cerro Tomalasta (2020m), Carolina is a photogenic little village of stone houses and dirt roads. Take away the power lines and you could be stepping back in time 100 years. The region boomed in 1785 when the Spanish moved in to exploit local gold mines that had first been used by the Inca. Nobody uses street addresses in Carolina – the town is small enough to navigate without them.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

One of the quirkier museums in the country, **Museo de Poesia** (admission free; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sat) honors San Luis' favorite son, poet Juan Cristofer Lafinur. The museum has a few artifacts from the poet's life, plus handwritten homages to the man by some of Argentina's leading poets.

Across the creek and up the hill from the poetry museum is a small **stone labyrinth**, set on the hilltop. It should provide you with an hour or so of entertainment (or, if your sense of direction is really bad, days of frustration).

Huellas Turismo (☎ 02652-490224; www.huellasturismo.com.ar) is the local tour operator – it can set you up with tours of the local gold mine

(AR$25, two hours), rock climbing and rappelling trips on Cerro Tomalasta, and tours of Inti Huasi, La Casa de la Piedra Pintada and La Angostura.

SLEEPING & EATING

Accommodation is improving in Carolina, but if you can't find a place, ask in the restaurants for a *casa de familia* (room in a private house with shared bathroom), which rents for around AR$25 per person.

Rincón del Oro Hostel (☎ 490212; Pringles s/n; dm AR$30) Set on a hilltop overlooking town, this great little hostel has a rustic, intimate feel despite its 57-bed capacity.

La Posta del Caminante (☎ 490223; www.lapostadelcaminante.com.ar; RP 9 s/n; s/d AR$150/180; 🚭) Carolina's one hotel is set in a gorgeous stone building on the edge of town. A lovely seminatural rock swimming pool out the back completes the picture. The hotel is open mainly in summer, so if you're set on staying here, call ahead.

La Tomalasta (mains AR$15-20; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Good-value home-cooked meals. If it looks like it's closed, go around the back to the general store and ask them to open up.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Regular buses run from Carolina to San Luis (AR$10, two hours), passing through El Volcán. Some continue on to Inti Huasi (AR$4, 30 minutes).

Around Carolina

INTI HUASI

This wide, shallow **cave** (admission free; 🕒 daylight hr), whose name means 'house of the sun' in Quechua, makes an interesting stop, as much for the gorgeous surrounding countryside as the cave itself. Radiocarbon dating suggests that the cave was first inhabited by the Ayampitín some 8000 years ago. There are regular buses here from San Luis (AR$13, 2½ hours), passing through Carolina (AR$4, 30 minutes).

LA CASA DE LA PIEDRA PINTADA

Coming from Carolina, 3km before the Inti Huasi cave, a dirt track turns off to Paso de los Reyes. From the turnoff, it's an easy 5km signposted walk to **La Casa de la Piedra Pintada** (admission free), where more than 50 rock carvings are easily visible in the rock face. Follow the signs until you reach an open meadow at the base of Cerro Sololasta and you see the new cable-and-wood walkway up the cliff face that gives you access to the site. Once you're finished with the rock art, continue up the hill for spectacular views out over the Sierras Puntanas.

If you're unsure about getting here on your own, there's usually someone around at Inti Huasi who will guide you for a nominal fee.

LA ANGOSTURA

This site, 22km northeast of El Trapiche, holds one of the most extensive collections of indigenous rock art in the region. There's around 1000 examples here, painted and carved onto a shallow concave cliff face. Some are wonderfully preserved, while others fade with exposure to the weather. Keep an eye out for three mortar holes carved into the rock floor; they were most likely used to grind grain.

The site is tricky to access, even with a private vehicle. On the El Trapiche–Paso de los Reyes road, a signpost leads off to the right, through a closed (but not locked) gate. From there, it's 2.5km along a very bad dirt road to an abandoned stone farmhouse where the road ends.

The trail to the site is unmarked, but if you head uphill, veering right, you'll reach a stone bluff on the hilltop, giving excellent views over the valley. Descending on the right side of the bluff, you'll see the wire fence set up to protect the works of art.

Tour operators in Carolina (see opposite) and San Luis (see p331), including the San Luis Hostel (p332) come out here, but it's not a popular excursion – get a group together, or expect to pay top dollar.

VALLE DE CONLARA

Heading northeast to Merlo from San Luis, the landscape changes dramatically as the road climbs into the hills. Around La Toma the land is arid and desertlike, Papagayos has its own unique vistas, punctuated by palm trees, while Merlo (p330) is a lush mountain town.

La Toma

☎ 02655 / pop 6820

A dusty little town plonked down by the side of RP 20, La Toma owes its existence to the mineral riches in the surrounding hills. This is the only place in the world where green onyx is mined. The stone is soft and

hard to work, so not much jewelry is made out of it, but several shops around town sell souvenirs made from green onyx and other local stones.

Tours of the local mines can be arranged at the **Cooperativa Telefónica office** (☎ 421400; Belgrano & Moreno; 2hr tours AR$25). Tours leave at 10am, Monday to Friday.

If you're interested in seeing the workshops (and the working conditions therein), drop in to **Onix Olimpia** (☎ 421732; H Yrigoyen & Av Centenario) and ask about a free tour. Workers will whip up a Holy Mary head right before your eyes, in about two minutes.

Hostería El Indio (☎ 421393; www.hosteriaelindio.com.ar; cnr Av San Martín & 7 de Mayo; s/d AR$66/88; 🚭) is the best place to stay in town, featuring large, cool rooms with leopard-skin-print bedspreads.

Italia Hotel (Belgrano 644; mains AR$20-28; 🕒 lunch & dinner) is the town's one true restaurant, serving up some reasonable set meals and tasty empanadas.

Estancia La Estanzuela

Set on a Jesuit mission dating from 1750, this gorgeous **estancia** (☎ 02656-420559; www.estanzuela.com.ar; per person with full board AR$220; 🚭) has been left in near-original condition from the days when it was a working farm. Floors are wood or stone, walls are meter-thick adobe and many ceilings are constructed in the traditional gaucho style. The house is decorated like a museum, with antique furniture, paintings and family heirlooms galore. A small pond that the Jesuits built for irrigation serves for romantic rowboating outings and there is plenty of horseback riding and nature walking to be done. This is a very special – near-magical – place and the minimum three-night stay should not be hard to adhere to. Prices include meals, drinks and activities.

The property is located 2km off RP 1, between Villa del Carmen and Papagayos. The closest public transport is to Papagayos from Merlo (see below). Reservations are essential and must be made at least two days in advance. If you don't have your own transport, ask about getting picked up in Papagayos or San Luis.

Papagayos

☎ 02656 / pop 420

Possibly the last thing you're expecting to see in this part of the world is a valley full of palm trees, but that's exactly where this small town is situated. The town is located on the banks of the Arroyo Papagayos and has huge Caranday palms surrounding it, giving the area a certain notoriety for handicrafts made from their trunks and branches.

Small stores (mostly attached to workshops) selling these *artesanias en palma* are scattered around town. Rosa López (in front of plaza) has the best range. The tourist office can provide a map showing all the store locations, along with other local attractions.

The *arroyo* (creek) is a good place to cool off – its length is dotted with swimming holes. For a more formal swimming environment, the Balneario Municipal offers swimming pools, picnic and barbeque areas.

For horseback riding and trekking to local waterfalls and swimming spots out of town, ask at the tourist office or Hostería Los Leños.

The **Oficina de Turismo** (☎ 480093; www.papagayos.gov.ar; RP 1 s/n; 🕒 8am-8pm) is useful for contacting guides and arranging tours, and has decent maps of the town.

Hostería Los Leños (☎ 478289; www.hosterialosleños.com.ar; Av Comechingones 555; r AR$160; 🚭) is the best-looking hotel in town, featuring fresh new rooms with spacious bathrooms and a good-sized swimming pool. Also on offer are excellent home-cooked meals (mains AR$20 to AR$30) and staff can set you up with a picnic lunch if you're off on a day trip.

From Papagayos' main plaza there are regular buses to Merlo (AR$3.50, one hour).

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